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THIS SPACE HAS (A) SEX

Aaron Betsky

The space you are inhabiting right now is not gender-neutral, however bland it might look and whatever laws might pertain to its use. The man-made world is made by men, and women have had to make their own places within it. This truism has governed architecture for millennia and has led to the identification of the discipline with values that we think of as masculine: the imposition of order, the exercise of power through that arrangement, the privileging and exposition of elements that fight natural forces such as gravity and subjugate natural materials to craft. Meanwhile interiors are still places we think of as sensual, sometimes even sensuous, and sensible - values we associate still with femininity. They focus on making us comfortable and they eschew -if they are well-designed - both literal and metaphorical hard edges. Moreover, buildings are made by male architects working in a heroic tradition, and interiors are made by non-professionals, or if they do have a professional touch, by interior designers who are still predominantly either female or gay males.

I first wrote about this situation almost forty years ago in my books *Building Sex: Men, Women and the Construction of Sexuality* (1992) and *Queer Space: The Spaces of Same-Sex Desire* (1995), and expected that by now this situation would have changed. I believe that it has somewhat, but much more slowly than I anticipated and only around the fringes of the design disciplines. While women now make up to and even more than half of the incoming classes of most architecture schools, their numbers decrease steadily through professional education and then even further through licensure. The amount of women with a significant influence or profile in the discipline or profession are still very few, and even fewer are sole practitioners. Not only that, but the discipline remains enslaved to the notion that the best buildings are those that are the biggest, the boldest, the most muscular, and resist nature both in form and in permanence with the most success. The biggest erection still wins.

As a result, most of our built environment is still an alien wasteland of boxes in which we are forced to live, work, and play.

We subject ourselves to the power of the architect and his client, and subject ourselves to their ordering principles. We do not necessarily like being in these objects with their offices, bedrooms, and other assigned spaces with the rigid enclosures, but we have little choice. We perform the task we are assigned to in the right space, and we conform fully in our behavior to the clues and cues built into the very bones of buildings.

Around the fringes of architecture, there has been resistance to such static and restrictive forms, both in the emergence of fluidity in the way in which buildings appear, and in the acceptance of architecture tactics that eschew the over exercise of power. Has this altered the discipline in any fundamental manner? I think not.

The undulations that have become common in some architecture practices are the result of the application of computer technologies, both in terms of design tools and in terms of fabrication that allows the complexity of such shapes to appear more or less as the designer imagined them. While some architects use them to just make more fluid objects, others see them as tools that let them merge inside and outside and avoid programmatic and social separation. This is true especially in the work of the late Zaha Hadid and her successor firm, but is also a hallmark of the designs produced by UN Studio, to name just one prominent other practitioner of computer-assisted design.

The question of whether the fact that prominent women such as Hadid or UN Studio's Caroline Bos have been central in this movement has made these forms more "feminine" is a difficult one to answer. Certainly Hadid very much resisted the identification of her work with issues or modes of femininity, but she did acknowledge the influence of textiles and forms of architecture that sought to break singular displays of power (such as constructivism) as influences in her work, thus aligning herself with traditions that are outside of the history of the erection of stand-alone displays of power.

The emergence of hybrid practices that combine various forms of art and politics is also one we can associate with the work of prominent women such as Elizabeth Diller of Diller Scofidio + Renfro or Petra Blaise of Inside/Out. They have integrated not just knowledge and skills that come from fields such as interior design, textile design, performance art, and landscape into their



work, but they have focused on issues such as breaking through the barriers between inside an outside and, in the case of Diller, making the confluence of the male gaze and the world-wide security apparatus apparent.

However, the larger movement towards understanding architecture not just as the making of autonomous buildings, but as the gathering together of existing materials to create moments of sense and shelter within a larger world that many of see as alien and wasteful has been one in which women have played no more or less prominent a role than in other approaches to the application of architecture. Certainly the presence of a feminist discussion of privilege and exploitation has helped define such new avenues of making that is critical of closed and restrictive structures, but for all that the lack of prominent architects of any sort or attitude remains deeply troubling.

In reviewing the absurdity of the dichotomy between the roles women and men have found themselves playing in the designed environment, and the manner in which those roles have become tied in with spatial and building qualities, I speculated in the mid 1990s that the way in which queer men and women historically both used and designed spaces might offer an alternative to such a split. The exploration of spaces that had escaped control and the male gaze in cruising grounds and meeting places for sex, the fascination with turning systems of control against themselves and into means of providing pleasure, and the merging of elements developed for (exterior) architecture and the textures and forms proper to the interior in the design sensibilities of certain late 19th and 20th century architects, from Louis Sullivan to Jan Kotera, and from Philip Johnson to Charles Moore, seemed to me to offer fruitful ways to create an architecture that was both sensual and meaningful, liberating and practical, and ordered and sheltering.

Moreover, several artists and architects have over these last few decades been interested in how their queer sensibilities might help instill such hybrid and critical sensibilities into architecture. Pioneering work done by artists/architects such as Mark Robbins and Juergen Mayer H. has been continued with particular success and a grand scale by Elmgreen & Dragset, and queer sensibilities in the use of space has become common in much performance art, dance, and site-specific installation work.

By its very nature, however, this work has remained on the margins of the profession, both because of its messaging (and often materials), and because it does not pursue the making of the types of buildings that still form the meat of the architecture matter. The influence of such work remains in its inflection of architecture towards something less rigid in its forms and purposes.

Of equal influence –meaning that it has been significant, but not transformative—has been the concerted study of women and queer architects in architecture history. The retroactive validation of major figures such as Julia Morgan or Charlotte Perriand, as well as the recognition that the contributions made by some architects who we could, again retroactively, classify as falling somewhere in the LGBTQ spectrum, were at least partially tied to the ways in which they had to practice because of their sexual preferences, has helped to create role models for today’s architects that differ from the standard, Vitruvian or Howard Roarkian model of either service to the state or heroic resistance.

Some of this research has also drawn our attention to the inherent contradictions in what appears to be the linear history of architecture. The identification of what Mark Wigley described as the “leaky crypt” at the heart of architecture and the many fissures and contaminations opened up in what has come to be known as the discourse of architecture since the assault on its dominant texts by deconstructivist critics has made several generations of architects question the object of architecture. Thus the way we think about, describe, and perhaps design buildings has been both feminized and queered –albeit, again, only in the discipline’s margin.

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So the work must continue, with this exhibition and with actual design. Architecture is still a discipline that is dominated by men and produces more monumentally wasteful and socially destructive structures than it contributes possibilities and beauty to our designed environment. An awareness of this situation must come first. Then we need to find ways to make architecture more sustainable, open, and beautiful, and we need to find ways to be at home in a modern world that most of us experience as alien and restrictive. To do so, we must turn to the contributions women and queers have made and see how they open our eyes both to the crimes of architecture and to its liberating possibilities. We must also, quite simply, work to make architecture a place where all people, regardless of sex or sexual preference, let alone race, have their rightful place.



Aaron Betsky, is a critic and author of more than a dozen books on art, architecture, and design. Trained at Yale, Betsky has worked as a designer for Frank O. Gehry & Associates and Hodgetts + Fung, taught at SCI-Arc, and served as the director of the 11th Venice International Architecture Biennale. He is currently the dean at the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture at Taliesin and Taliesin West. His writings focus on Queer Theory and space and sexuality.

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