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Author(s): Janie Grote

Source: *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Special Issue: Women's Voices in Architecture and Planning (Summer, 1992), pp. 158-168

Published by: Locke Science Publishing Company, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43029072>

Accessed: 04-03-2019 21:36 UTC

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MATRIX: A RADICAL APPROACH TO ARCHITECTURE

Janie Grote
Matrix Architects Ltd., Feminist Co-operative

Matrix Architects, a feminist co-operative based in London, grew out of the New Architecture Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970's. Starting from the basis of giving the client/user group maximum control over the design of what they insist is the client's and not the architect's building, they aim to empower women to take control of their own environment. They have chosen to prioritize working with women's groups and groups which benefit women as women traditionally have had little access to and been excluded from the building process. Consequently, they have developed a consultative approach and become involved not only in the conventional areas of building design and supervision, but also in education, training and publishing. By organizing as a workers co-operative, issues concerned with equal opportunities in both the relationship with different client groups and within the organization itself can be addressed. Two projects -- The Jagonari Education Resource Centre and Harlow Women's Aid Centre -- illustrate this consultative approach in practice.

HOW A FEMINIST PRACTICE TAKES SHAPE: MATRIX EXPERIENCE

Matrix Architects Ltd. Feminist Co-operative is a women only architects practice based in London, currently employing seven workers, and organized on the egalitarian principles of the co-operative common ownership movement. Matrix's roots lie in the feminist and community politics of the 1970's in England when groups like the New Architecture Movement (NAM) took a radical socialist perspective on the public's disillusionment with modern architecture. A women's discussion group formed out of NAM to campaign against sexist advertising in the architectural press. Located within the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970's, a loose group formed from interested women. Calling itself Matrix and continuing as an active umbrella group to address issues concerning women and the built environment, the women compiled an exhibition called "Home Truths", organized the conference "Women and Space", and a sub-group emerged to write the book *Making Space - Women and the Man-made Environment*.

Although many of the founder members of Matrix had architectural training, the original group was not set up to take on architectural projects. By the late seventies, however, many women had entered the building industry by a different route, namely as tradeswomen. The need to establish training facilities which were not hostile to women learning these hitherto "male" skills became apparent. When funding became available to set up a "Women's Carpentry Workshop" in Lambeth, Matrix was approached to help with the renovation of the building.

In 1981, after this successful collaboration, some group members decided to set up a women's architectural practice to undertake paid work. The new Matrix, defining itself as a feminist practice, would differ from conventional "male-dominated" practices in a number of important ways. The feminist aim of empowering women to take control over their own lives, and tenet that the personal is political demanded that both the internal relationships within the organization and the organization's relationship with its clients be structured in order to foster these ideals.

The constitutional structure chosen for the organization was that of a worker's co-operative. As such, each member of the co-operative is both an employee and a director of the company with an equal say in its running. Unlike conventional practices, there is no in-built hierarchy, no partners who own the practice and determine the working conditions, and no requirement to have access to wealth in order to buy into the partnership. Such an egalitarian structure allows the women members to take control of their working lives, determine their own pay and conditions, and prevents discrimination on the basis of financial affluence.

Through the participation of all its members, Matrix has successfully developed working practices which take into account women's childcare responsibilities including flexible hours and part-time work, and positive action recruitment procedures that are inclusive and that address discrimination whether based on race, class, sexuality, maternal status, or affluence.

The benefit of such an approach should not be underestimated. The internal structure of any organization is an important adjunct to its overall approach. Indeed, in England, it is still the case that the majority of architectural partnerships are set up by men from the more affluent sectors of society and exclude most women.¹ By developing structures that make it possible for more women, including women with a range of personal experiences and backgrounds, to be actively employed in the design of buildings, the potential for drawing on a wider vision and a broader creative landscape is enormous.

It is an adage that if architects lived or used the buildings they designed they would not design them as they do. Integral to this discontent is the tacit acceptance that the building is the creative vision of and hence "belongs to" the architect. With this approach dominating mainstream architecture, and with women making up only 7 percent of registered architects in the UK even in 1991, the potential for women's experience and needs within the built environment to be included in the design brief is extremely small. To empower women in the design process demands a re-thinking of the relationships between both the architect and the client and between the architect and the process of designing a building.

By the late 1970's women in the UK were not only angry at being excluded from decision-making processes related to architecture, but also angry about the decisions that were being made. As women demanded the right to "come out" of the home and participate in all walks of life, they also became increasingly aware of how the built environment, the structure of their home and cities, reinforced stereotypic assumptions about family life and the role of women in it.²

To address these issues, and in an attempt to redress the balance, Matrix started from the premise that the building belonged to the client/users and not to the architect. In order to make this a felt experience, it was recognized that strategies needed to be developed to enable the client group to be involved in and have control over the design. By such a joint approach, it was anticipated that, no matter how small the project, it would be possible to produce a building whose quality satisfies its users. In the process of women acquiring a voice in and control over this vital part of their lives from which they have traditionally been excluded, the divide between the profession and the public would also be narrowed if not overcome.

There are a number of practical consequences to this approach. For full client participation, the Co-operative needed to develop a consultative approach that was not patronizing or hierarchical and yet addressed the issue that most women, as clients, had little or no experience in the building process. In addition, women in the UK have generally had less access to money than men and have grown accustomed to "making do" on very little. As a consequence, women's groups often enter the arena with low expectations of what they might be able to achieve and/or to what they might be entitled.

It was necessary, therefore, to become involved not only in the conventional areas of building design and supervision, but also in education, training and publishing. Giving courses on how to read plans, producing rough three dimensional models for the client group to rearrange, taking groups to visit other buildings for ideas, looking at photographs and pictures, encouraging women to go for the "ideal" and then scale down to the possible, and sharing ideas and experiences have all become part of the Co-operatives consultative approach.

Furthermore, to develop an "inclusive" approach to architecture, where women irrespective of race, sexuality, class or disability can gain confidence in participating, it has been necessary to highlight the ways that women often feel unheard and silenced. The appropriation and withholding of information and knowledge by "experts", institutionalized sexism, racism and classism and the consequent perceived absence of "having my experience validated", the presentation of matters of style and taste as structural necessities, all contribute to undermining women's confidence and keeping women silent. Not surprisingly, we all listen and interpret what we hear from our own cultural bias. It is vital to acknowledge this. Only then can listening skills be developed that, not only hear what is said, but also listen for what is not said in order that

the indifference to and/or the lack of awareness of particular groups of people and their interests are not reproduced in the design of the building.

Likewise it is important to impart as much information as possible to ensure that the client has the knowledge to exercise power. Making a point of clearly stating ones own visual and stylistic preferences, for instance, allows the client, with equal clarity, to identify on which parts of the design they can impose their own taste.

Experience has confirmed that women often feel that their ideas and requirements are not translated satisfactorily into buildings and that their ideas are marginalised. Practically, in developing an inclusive approach, it is often necessary to spend some considerable time with clients in order to discover what they really want from their buildings. In the short-term, therefore, it is clearly a more expensive process than conventional approaches.

As the ideas of the Women's Movement become sifted and filtered into the mainstream culture, the importance of a participatory approach is now gaining some recognition through the Community Architecture Movement and the development of Community Technical Aid. Local Authority funding has been made available in some parts of the UK to allow architectural practices to provide as a free service the preliminary work in developing the architectural brief.

Matrix has been successful in applying for such funding to provide free architectural services up to feasibility stage and advice to women's groups and groups which benefit women within the voluntary sector. In administering the grant, and arising out of their experiences as women in a male-dominated society, the Co-operative has chosen to address the issues of equal opportunities and positive action.

Thus, a feminist approach to the design of buildings and space, one that aims at re-shaping power relationships between the "expert" and the "layperson", necessarily allows women as clients to be involved at every stage of the design process and devises the means to do so.

RADICAL APPROACH IN PRACTICE

(The two projects summarized below illustrate how some of these points have worked in practice.)

Jagonari Educational Resource Centre for Asian Women

Jagonari is an Educational Resource Centre for Asian women in East London. Completed in 1987, the project started when research by a group of Asian women identified the lack of resources for them in East London. As an illustration of the modest aspirations women often have, Jagonari first approached Matrix with the idea of using a single story, possibly prefabricated building which might be extended in phases at a later stage if necessary. After setting up an initial consultation process with groups of Asian women, it became clear that they needed a more substantial and flexible building. The successful outcome is a new, four story main building that fronts onto the main road with an enclosed courtyard and a two story creche building behind.

Equally important was acknowledging the eurocentric nature of architectural training in the UK, and the need to avoid cultural assumptions. By involving Jagonari in the decisions about



FIGURE 1. Jagonari: view of the courtyard and covered walkway.



FIGURE 2. Jagonari: front elevation.

how and where different spaces should be arranged, discussions about how much the building should reflect a non-European culture and tradition continued throughout the design stage and became the decision of the Jagonari group. The kitchen, for example, was designed to house both a high level western styled sink and a shallow low level Asian styled sink.

The Jagonari client group was able to convey the type of building it wanted after being encouraged to bring in photographs, postcards, and drawings of favored buildings and going on site visits; for instance, the group went on a tour of buildings made from pink bricks which ended in a brick picnic in an attempt to select the bricks they wanted.

It was clear to Jagonari that, integral to the design of a building existing in both a racist and sexist cultural setting, was the need for the building to enclose and provide a secure space for women. The internal courtyard provides a recreation space which is secure while the reception area, by designing a narrow passage way both visible and defensible, is nonetheless welcoming (Figure 1).

The development of the elevations was a more gradual process. Initially, Jagonari wanted the building to be low key. Through their participation in the design process, however, their confidence grew; they felt more comfortable taking space in the world and they moved towards a more emphatic statement. The grilles on the external elevation were designed to protect the windows and doors while adding to and acknowledging the Asian identity of the building (Figure 2).

Scale models were produced for Jagonari to dismantle and re-assemble to assist in agreeing on the final plans. The building provides a flexible, successful, lively and secure space for Asian women, it does not impose eurocentric values and interpretations on the users and is one which Jagonari can rightfully claim as theirs.³

Harlow Women's Aid Centre

A current project with Harlow Women's Aid, also shows the importance of including all the users of a building in the consultative approach. The group had used a male architect before but had been dissatisfied with the amount of input they had been able to have and with the institutional nature of the improvements that resulted; the unscreened toilets and shower facilities, in particular, were more typical of a school sports hall than a residential home. Also, in order to increase the number of bedrooms, the existing ones had simply been subdivided creating small, badly lit "box" type rooms.

When, in 1989, asbestos was discovered in the fabric of the building, the local authority provided funds for the remedial works. In light of this, the Women's Aid workers decided to also address the problems presented by the overcrowding and inadequate facilities but were determined that, this time, they wanted to be involved in the design process.

One of the architectural challenges of such a project is that the residential elements needs to be both a communal and a personal "home" for residents who may only stay for a short time and who may require childcare facilities. Also to be incorporated within the design, however, are the needs of the staff who run the building and for whom it is a place of work.

Unlike Jagonari, the client group already possessed a building and had experienced its inadequacies. Who better, then, to know the shortfalls of the existing building than the current resi-

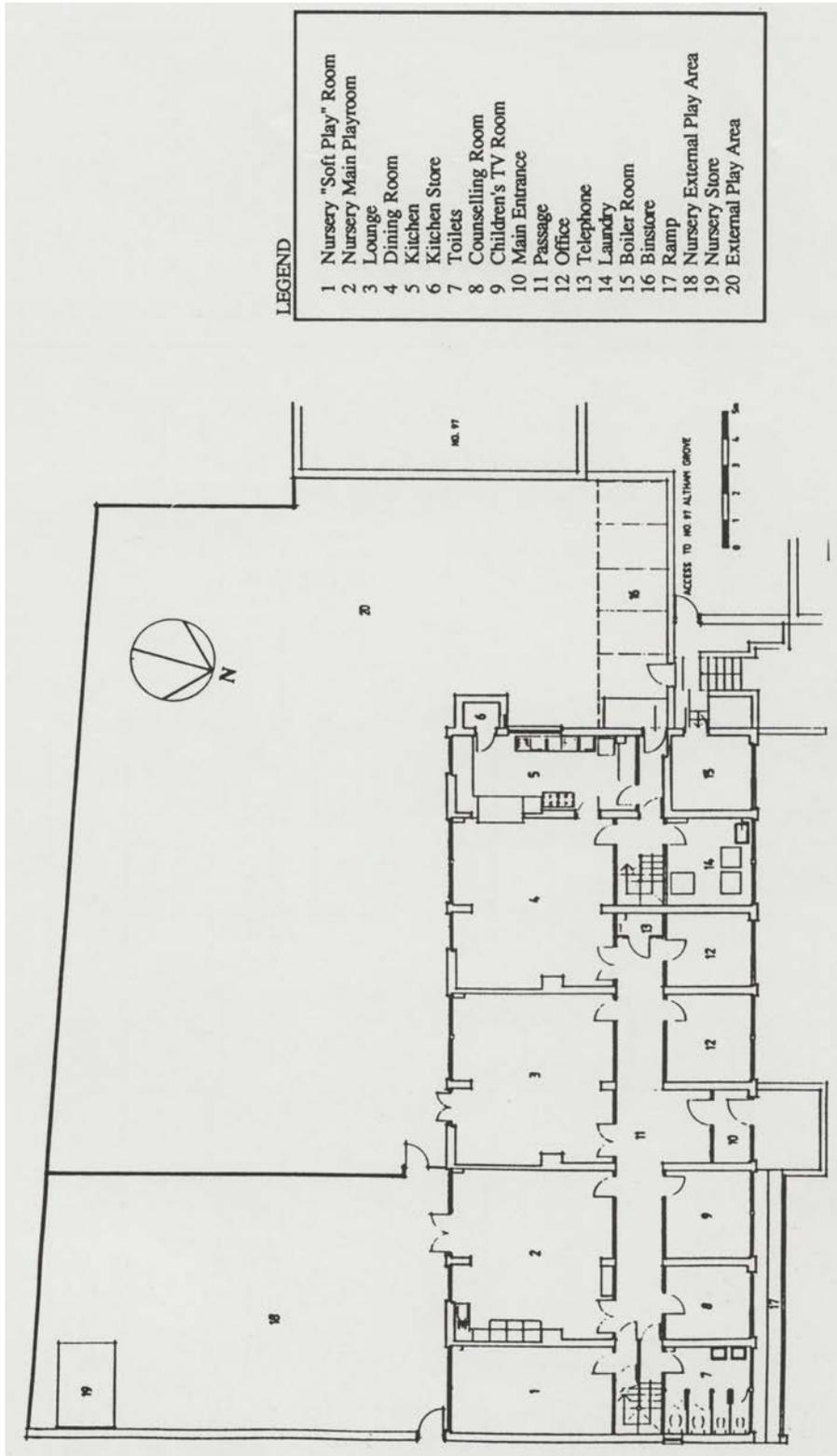


FIGURE 3. Existing ground floor plan, Harlow Women's Aid.

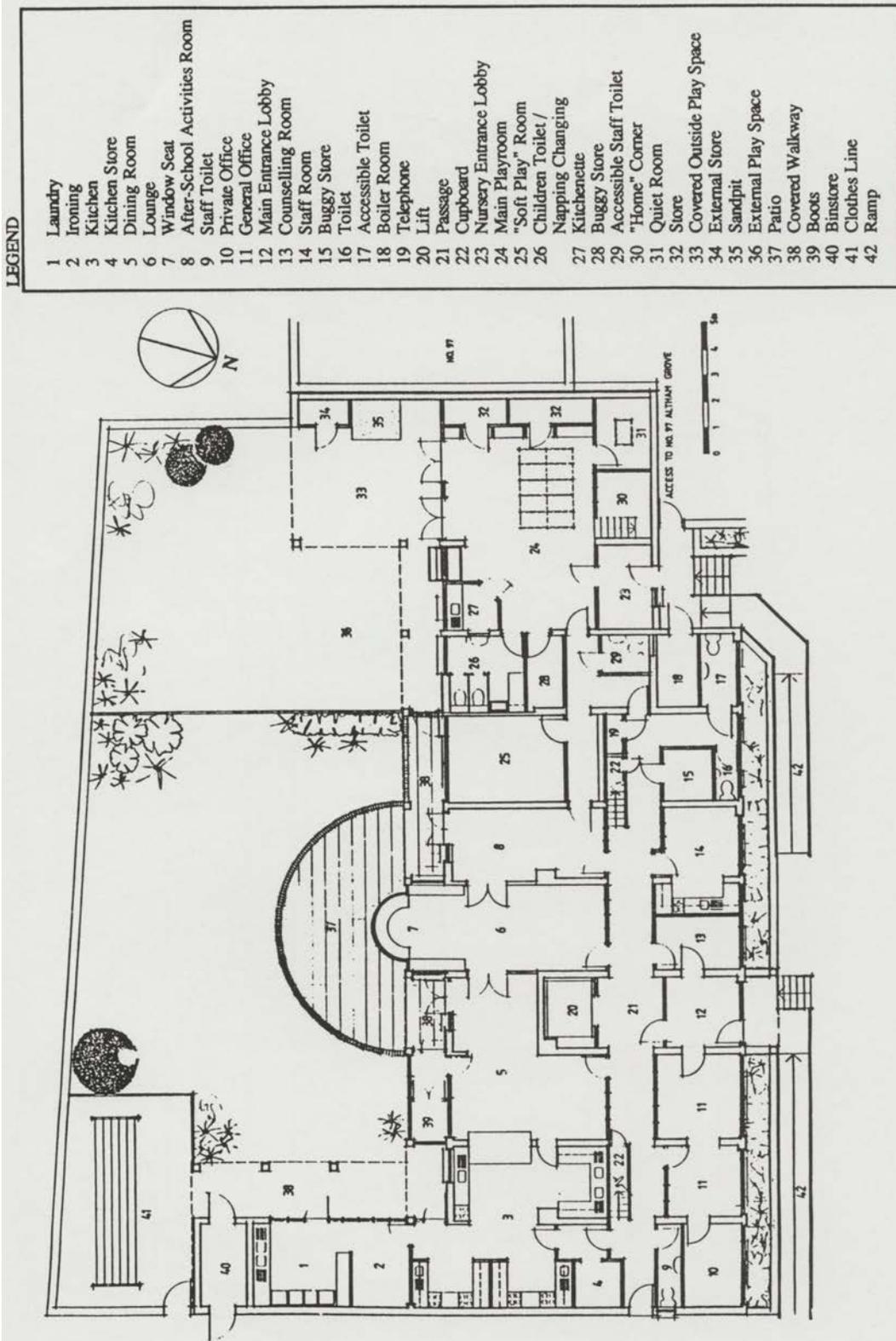


FIGURE 4. Proposed ground floor plan, Harlow Women's Aid.

dents and staff. Their involvement greatly influenced the scheme design identifying the need for privacy, security and better childcare facilities. They highlighted the inadequacies of the existing design, such as, the fanlights above bedroom doors that kept residence awake from the lighted communal corridor; noise from the laundry intruded into bedrooms situated above it; the shared kitchen was too small and did not allow different dietary needs to be accommodated or respected; the location of children's play areas precluded both visual and aural contact from the main communal areas; walls and shrubs at the entrance provided hiding places for possible attackers; the flat roofed area to the rear encouraged break-ins at the first floor level.

All this information was invaluable in drawing up the initial scheme designs. Two schemes were developed and presented to Harlow Women's Aid in the form of rough cardboard models. By rearranging the models, the client group was able to visualize the proposed schemes and make their own alterations to it. The final scheme incorporated much of the staff's and resident's concerns, extending and upgrading the existing building to provide for 14 households in residence. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the existing and proposed ground floor plans for the Centre.

Without the detailed discussions with all the users of the building, many of the considerations would have been overlooked, as was indeed the case with the previous alterations. Through Harlow Women's Aid's active participation in the design process and decision-making, they now have the opportunity of having a building which they know will be suitable to their purposes because they have taken a directive role in its design.

CONCLUSION

It is hoped that these two different projects illustrate some of the ways that can be successfully employed to overcome the divide between the professional and the public and to re-shape the power relationship between the "expert" and the "layperson" in the design of buildings. The experience for both the client group and the architects throughout the entire process was enormously rewarding and educational. The confidence building aspect cannot be overemphasized. Jagonari started off with very modest expectations and a desire for a low profile. But the confidence that developed through their participation in the process is mirrored in a building that makes a bold and assertive statement about who they are and their right to exist, and to be recognized and included in local provision. As such, the building has become more than a local resource and education centre for Asian women. It's existence is one of self-definition in defiance of the stereotypes prevalent within a sexist and racist society.

Although Harlow Women's Aid Refuge has yet to be refurbished, the participation of the client group in the scheme design again ensured that the experience and needs of this particular sector of women were heard, respected and incorporated into their "home". While it may be questioned as to whether such a consultative and inclusive approach is cost effective (it is certainly more expensive in the short term), it is pertinent to argue that the benefit in the longer term is more than a quality building. As women gain confidence they will make their own statements about the built environment, the spaces that they choose to inhabit, the considerations that define the buildings within these spaces, and the relationships between the workplace, home and childrearing. It is, therefore, reasonable to speculate that the social and sexual relationships between the sexes will change and with it women's dependency on men. As such, a consultative, inclusive approach to architecture is a challenge to patriarchy and a necessary step towards a full, authentic and vital life for all people.

NOTES

1. Royal Institute of British Architects (1991) *Architects' Employment & Earnings*. London: Royal Institute of British Architects.
2. MATRIX (1984) *Making Space - Women and the Man Made Environment*. London: Pluto Press.
3. Matrix (in press) *Black Women in Architecture*.
4. Other publications by Matrix:
(1986) *Building for Childcare - making better buildings for the Under-5's*. Matrix and the Greater London Council Women's Committee.
(1987) *A Job Designing Buildings*. London Borough's Grants Scheme. 2nd edition
(1989) *PATH - positive action training in housing: A work experience guide*. London: Matrix and PATH Ltd.

Additional information may be obtained by writing directly to Matrix Architects Ltd, Feminist Co-operative, The Print House, 18 Ashwin Street, London, England E8 3DL.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Photographs used with permission of Martin Charles, photographer.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Matrix Architects Ltd, Feminist Co-operative is a multi-racial women's architectural practice, set up in 1981. We specialize in working with people, groups and organizations who have traditionally been excluded from involvement in the design of buildings. Many of our ideas about the way we work with clients stem from our founding commitment to involving women in the design and production of buildings. We undertake projects which fall outside the range of normal architectural services and which include providing courses on technical drawing for trainee tradeswomen, on the building process for premises workers and client groups and on building law, casting general structures and construction for practicing tradeswomen. In addition, we have published information on the design of childcare facilities, careers in architecture and on women and the environment.