Since the 1990s, a radical and interdisciplinary approach to spatial practice offers a rich and productive seam for feminism and architecture.

In the 1990s, the drawn and written projects of the American architect and critic, Jennifer Bloomer, aimed to reveal the insufficiency of logical and rational structures such as spoken language to explain the world, and instead brought into operation the irrational and subversive elements in written texts – the feminine. Drawing parallels between the creation of a building, assumed to be a clean act of control and precision, and the mess of childbirth, Bloomer questioned the gender of creativity. Through her dirty drawings and her incorporation of parts of the female anatomy – breasts, milk, fluids, blood, hatching, udders – into architecture, Bloomer generated a critique of the sterility of the architectural drawing process. The feminine in her work was to be found in the so-called slippage of words, for example, the term ‘big jugs’ placed within an architectural context, suggested many things, including large breasts, but also the role of the feminine and female body as a container or empty signifier used to represent patriarchal ideologies. Bloomer’s work demonstrated that the feminine can be a radical element in architectural practice.
While feminist debate in architecture first emerged much earlier in the 1970s, the 1990s saw discussions concerning the relationship between gender and space gain theoretical strength in the academy. In working across the boundary between theory and practice, and between architecture and other disciplines, the significant and influential feminist projects of the 1990s by Bloomer and others, such as Liz Diller, point to certain matters of concern, specifically critiques of disciplinary boundaries and procedures informed by a political concern with subjectivity. Their work suggests new modes of enquiry and action, which have since been developed through current endeavours, moving from providing a gendered analysis of architecture and its multiple forms of representation, to the production of work inside and outside the academy where subjects, selves and spaces are understood to be performed and constructed rather than simply represented, and where forms of action – in the pedagogical and professional environment – are prioritised, both to challenge sexism and also to engender more equitable conditions of work.

‘Through her dirty drawings and her incorporation of parts of the female anatomy into architecture, Bloomer generated a critique of the sterility of the architectural drawing process’
The work of contemporary feminist practitioners interested in architecture is located at sites of encounter between different spatial disciplines. Such work highlights an interest not only in the end product, but in the process of design itself, pointing to the importance of the dialogue between theory and practice in architecture. If the past decade has seen a flourishing of activity in feminism and architecture, driven by interdisciplinary concerns, then one of the changes in knowledge and understanding this has produced has been a rethinking of the role of theory, from a tool of analysis to a mode of practice in its own right. I use the term ‘theory’ here not to refer to modes of enquiry in science through either induction or deduction, but rather to critical theory, specifically because, according to Raymond Geuss, critical theories are forms of knowledge which are ‘reflective’ rather than ‘objectifying’ and take into account their own procedures and methods; they aim neither to prove a hypothesis nor prescribe a particular methodology or solution to a problem, but to offer self-reflective modes of thought that seek to change the world. I have found it helpful to extend the key qualities of ‘critical theory’ encapsulated by the Frankfurt School to include the work of practitioners, feminists and others, whose work is also self-critical and desirous of social change – and seeks to transform rather than simply describe.
Poster of the 2008 conference *Rethinking Theory, Space and Production: Henri Lefebvre Today* held at TU Delft.
Within academia, the rise in what has been termed ‘practice-led/based research’, as well as the influence of the writings of Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau on spatial practice, has produced an understanding of practice as a process which occurs not only through the design of buildings but also through the activities of using, occupying and experiencing them, and through the various modes of writing and imaging used to describe, analyse and interrogate space.

In Michel de Certeau’s discussion of spatial practices, he uses the terms strategy and tactic. For de Certeau, strategies seek to create places that conform to abstract models; whereas tactics do not obey the laws of places. While for Henri Lefebvre, spatial practices, along with representations of space and spaces of representation, form a trialectical model where space is produced through three inter-related modes. For Lefebvre, spatial practices can be understood in terms of perception and representations of space in terms of conception. Lefebvre also makes a careful distinction between representations of space and spaces of representation; the first he sees as operations which involve a systematised set of abstract and dominant codes, the second as the spaces of resistance, where invention and imagination flourish. It is possible to draw connections between de Certeau’s strategies and Lefebvre’s representations of space on the one hand, and de Certeau’s tactics and Lefebvre’s spaces of representation on the other, and suggest a distinction between those practices (strategies) that operate to maintain and reinforce existing social and spatial orders, and those practices (tactics) that seek to critique and question them. I favour such a distinction and have called the latter ‘critical spatial practice’ – a term which serves to describe both everyday activities and creative practices which seek to resist the dominant social order of global corporate capitalism.
Issues raised by feminism and taken forward through debates on the ‘feminine’ and gender difference have infused architecture to such an extent that they are no longer visible explicitly in terms of concerns generated out of sexual politics. Conditions of visibility have been very much part of feminist debate over the past decades, in particular the ways in which the vital contribution of feminist forebears have often been obscured, and so we must now be careful not to produce a new version of ‘hidden from history’ and partake in the act of obscuring feminism’s political imperative, while still allowing it to be indirect and to diffuse. Feminist architectural historian Karen Burns noted in 2010 that despite the large number of feminist publications in the 1990s, this was also the decade that saw the absence of feminist texts in major architectural theory anthologies and the inclusion of the ‘feminine’ in such anthologies through invited contributions authored by men. Most provocatively, she makes the excellent point that feminist architectural discourse and practice has, in various instances, in particular the discussions between Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman, been conducted by men through the bodies of women – through choric space.

The topic of feminism in architecture itself was perhaps less than visible in the first decade of the new millennium. There seemed to be fewer sole-authored publications on topics of feminism in architecture than in other disciplines such as visual culture, art history and cultural geography, and the edited collections that deepened the exploration of certain gendered dimensions of architectural design and culture did so in a more nuanced, subtle and implicit way than earlier work. These collections often examine themes derived from feminist enquiry, for example, domesticity, materiality, interiority, criticality and pattern, but, for the non-informed and often non-feminist reader, the association with the concerns of gender and sexual politics might not be at all obvious.

If you’re raped, you might as well “relax and enjoy it,” because no one will believe you!

In 1988, for example, of the estimated 185,000 rapes in the U.S., there were only 39,160 arrests, resulting in 15,700 convictions.*

*A Public Service Message from Guerrilla Girls 532 LaGuardia Pl. #237, NY 10012.

However, the danger is that, unless the references to feminism are made clear, we are unwittingly ‘unwriting’ architecture’s feminist genealogy. This then poses questions about acknowledgement, and raises the dangers of invisibility and of appropriation, to quote the Guerrilla Girls, of ‘seeing your ideas live on in others’. Additionally, and more importantly, to focus myopically on this issue, is to be blind to today’s context where far more urgent forms of oppression, marginalisation and difference demand our attention right now. Some of these remain directly connected with sex and gender, others are less obviously connected, for example, operations of resistance against neo-conservative and neo-liberal politics at work in architecture, connections between military domination and oil consumption, the uneven distribution of wealth between the majority and minority world, and the rapid unfolding of environmental catastrophes. Most recently we have witnessed gross acts of finance acquisition, where in the name of ‘bank bailouts’, wealth is being transferred, with government consent, to a tiny majority, while the catastrophic amounts of debt owed by ordinary people are ignored, and the very conditions that created the so-called credit crunch in the first place are not placed under review. In this situation, in the United Kingdom to name just one country, in the coalition government’s Comprehensive Spending Review of 2010 women were listed as one group of society to lose out.

‘The work of contemporary feminist practitioners interested in architecture is located at sites of encounter between different spatial disciplines’

The situation in the last decade has changed dramatically, though, and we were now witnessing an amazing rebirth of what some are calling ‘fourth wave’ feminism. This current work, led by many young feminists, recognises the international dimensions of the feminist struggle and connects resistance to sexism with the fight against racial discrimination and heterosexism. In this work we see the interconnectedness of feminism with movements such as LGBTQ and Black Lives Matter, and the key position intersectional theory now plays in showing the cross-cutting nature of oppression and the need to hold these different liberation movements together. Because struggles against oppression operate at both macro and micro levels, connections need to be constructed between the large scale and the small detail too, as well as linking up concerns of the marginalised in the north and the south.
In what follows, I consider whether there is a set of particular qualities that might characterise a specifically feminist approach to critical spatial practice. I suggest that collectivity, subjectivity, alterity, performativity and materiality highlight modes of operation that feature strongly in a predominantly feminist mode of critical spatial practice. It strikes me that this is the task for a feminist critical spatial practice in the second and third decades of the 21st century – this is the matter at hand. The modes of working characteristic to a feminist approach to critical spatial practice are highly appropriate for tackling the three-stranded collapse of ecology, energy and economy that faces us now – the disasters produced by climate chaos; the resource crises, including peak oil, mineral depletion and food scarcity; and the unacceptable inequalities created by a capitalist global economy driven by credit and debt.

Collectivity
In Hanley, in 1998, Muf won an open competition set up by Stoke City Council with the Public Art Commissioning Agency. The brief was to make a lifting barrier to prevent illegal traffic entering the town centre as part of a larger urban regeneration project. But in dialogue with the council planner at the outset, Muf opened the brief out to reveal how ‘art can contribute to a safer, more social environment’. Muf’s critical mode of operation has continued to evolve and invent new feminist approaches to critical spatial practice precisely because its way of working is itself a critique of architectural design methodologies that emphasise form and object making. There was a period in the first decade of the 21st century when Muf was frequently criticised in mainstream architectural discourse for not producing any ‘architecture’, but this was because the discourse was unable to recognise architecture as the production of anything other than stand-alone object-buildings. Rather, Muf’s working method highlights user participation in the design process and the importance of collaboration. For Muf, the design process is not an activity that leads to the making of a product, but is rather the location of the work itself.
Only resist: a feminist approach to critical spatial practice | Es...

https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/only-resist-a-fem...
After winning an open competition, Muf designed the streetscape of the cultural quarter of Stoke, contributing to a safer and more social environment. Image courtesy of Muf Architecture

In the 1970s/80s, several socialist design-build collectives were in operation, offering alternatives to the capitalist version of building production, including the feminist architectural co-operative Matrix. The early ’90s saw the rise of various practices, such as Muf, but also FAT and Fluid, which highlighted their collaborative intent by choosing non-proper nouns as names to challenge the use of the name of the leading director as the usual single architectural signature of authorship. Currently there are multiple versions of feminist collective practice, such as ArchiteXX, FATALE, MYCKET and Parlour, tackling issues of sexual discrimination and gender equity in the profession and education. Parlour’s work on gender equity is theoretically informed, but more importantly, a practical initiative for supporting women in the profession, providing a range of innovative tools, from the Parlour Guides to Equitable Practice to Marion’s List.

Lori Brown’s key interventions into media sites with ArchiteXX’s wikibombs have reignited the feminist project of the ’70s – herstory – to write women back into architectural history and the profession. And this initiative is not alone. There are sister projects around the world. In Berlin, Frankfurt, Lisbon, Moscow, Seville, Sheffield, Valencia and Zurich, to name just the ones I have had contact with, challenges are being made by collective feminist architecture groups to the lack of female representation in university curriculae and professional judging panels.
Subjectivity

The 1990s saw a rise in the relevance and pertinence of identity politics focusing on class, gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality. Emerging through – and at times diverging from – this discourse has been the work of post-structuralist feminists, which has been particularly important for architecture in offering ways of thinking about position, situation and location. In this work, new ways of knowing and being have been discussed in spatial terms, developing conceptual and critical tools such as Donna Haraway’s ‘situated knowledge’ to examine the inter-relations between location, subjectivity and knowledge.

Muf’s manual outlines the working practices of the all-female art and architecture practice. Image courtesy of Muf Architecture
Feminist critique has been particularly effective in mobilising the possibilities of Derridean deconstruction in architecture to allow an ongoing critique of binary oppositions, but most specifically the separate spheres or the ‘public-private’ division of gendered space manifest in different cultures at various historical periods. This work has drawn attention to the spaces both marginalised within gendered binaries in mainstream architectural discourse such as the domestic and the interior, and/or positioned as the term which exceeds such a binary distinction, such as the margin, the between, the everyday, the heterotopic and the abject.
Attending image for ar 2018

The interior and the domestic have been perhaps the most thoroughly explored of these ‘other spaces’ as they have both been directly associated with the private sphere, and as such subordinated to the public city, in both patriarchal and capitalist cultures, and within the discourse of modernity. The work of Jos Boys, Ben Campkin, Barbara Penner and others has been key in reconsidering such marginalised experiences and spaces in architecture, as those associated with sanitation, queer night life and disabilities.

The research on the interior has a specific resonance, since interior design or interior architecture, as a professional and academic discipline, has long been marginalised as women’s work in relation to architecture. Due to much feminist work by Gini Lee, Ro Spankie and others, the discipline has more recently found confidence. Mark Taylor and Julieanna Preston’s reader *Intimus*, for example, sketches out an intellectual context for interior design and architecture, which celebrates its difference from the mainstream profession, and in so doing draws on a rich and far more densely textured field of reference. Preston’s own work as an architect-artist engages with the interior through a wonderfully rich range of sculptural work. This is transformed through several stages, one of which involved physically working into standard modularised building materials to reveal their unique and often sensual interiors.

Idleness labouritory image for ar 2018


Alterity
Doina Petrescu’s edited volume, *Altering Practices*, from 2007, focused the debate in feminism and architecture around the ‘poetics and politics of the feminine’. In taking account of the feminine, as well as the feminist, the book acknowledges the role of aesthetics, as well as ethics, form, as well as function, in architecture. The focus is on the other, and on an understanding of those practices which aim to change, transform or alter. The notion of practising ‘otherwise’ or ‘otherhow’ relates to the political and poetic perspective taken by Petrescu in her practice with Constantin Petcou and others, as Atelier d’architecture autogéréée (aaa), or studio for self-managed architecture. This participatory collaborative platform has been engaging with ecological issues through projects such as ECObox and RURBAN. And in my view, ‘what it takes to make a relationship to make a thing’, a phrase articulated earlier by Muf, becomes in the work of aaa ‘what it takes to make a thing to make a relationship’, showing that the making of architecture can be a process for the re-making of subjects.

Lesley Lokko has previously addressed issues of otherness in architecture in connection to race, ethnicity and black identities in *White Papers, Black Marks: Architecture, Race, Culture* edited by her, which pushed for political change and recognised the often contingent and situated conditions of race and identity. Subdivided into sections by scale, this book shows how racial discriminations and resistances to oppression take place from the macro to the micro, from strategic planning and policy making to architectural details and small-scale art projects. Today Lokko is an important architectural educator at the forefront of debates on decolonising the curriculum.

Decolonisation agitates for the undoing of colonialism and the colonial empires established prior to the First World War throughout the world. The Rhodes Must Fall movement, which began on 9 March 2015 when a student threw excrement at the statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, gained success when just one month later this statue was removed. The action galvanised a dialogue in South Africa and around the world concerning race and oppression.

Decolonisation is a key resistance movement which can be clearly aligned with feminism today through ‘intersectionality theory’. This term was introduced in 1989, by critical race studies scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, whose work shows how intersecting social identities, particularly minority identities, relate to systems and structures of oppression, domination or discrimination.
Public unveiling

During the Algerian war of independence from France (1954-62), the wives of French military officers unveiled Algerian women to show that they were now siding with their French ‘sisters’

Performativity

Although architecture has been informed by psychoanalysis at the level of theoretical interpretation of buildings, images and texts, what is new in the feminist work in this area, is the degree to which understandings of subjectivity are informing the position of the writing subject and construction of texts themselves. The level of self-reflectivity in architectural debate lags behind other disciplines, and although there has been some degree of exploration of the relation between criticism, history and theory, very little explicit discussion exists of the situated-ness of the historian/theorist/critic herself.

In my own work I have argued that ‘site-writing’ is what happens when discussions concerning site-specificity extend to involve criticism, and the spatial qualities of the writing become as important in conveying meaning as the content of the criticism. My suggestion is that this kind of criticism or critical spatial writing, in operating as a mode of practice in its own right, questions the terms of reference that relate the critic to the work positioned ‘under’ critique. This is an active writing, composed of a constellation of voices that spatially structure the text, constructing as well as tracing the sites of relation between critic and work.
Across the arena of experimental and critical writing, new possibilities are being invented by feminists, often performative, which question the distanced objectivity of academic writing styles. Spatial practitioners draw inspiration from this intensely creative and theoretically rigorous strand of criticism, and in architecture there is a growing feminist interest in the critical and interdisciplinary performative qualities of writing, particularly powerful in the texts of feminists based in Australia, such as Karen Burns, Dorita Hannah, Stephen Loo, Naomi Stead and Linda Maria Walker. The work of feminist architects at KTH in Stockholm, such as Katerina Bonnevier, Brady Burroughs, Hélène Frichot, Catharina Gabrielsson, Katja Grillner, Rolf Hughes, Helena Mattsson, Karin Reisinger, Helen Runting, Meike Schalk and Malin Zimm, has been especially important in developing feminist architecture that intersects theory and practice through their collaborative pedagogical endeavour, FATALE. This project located in the architecture school has focused on activism and pedagogy, operating through different writing modes and other forms of performative and participatory practice.

Pinabausch ber2130

In choreographer Pina Bausch’s rendering of The Rite of Spring, Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York (2017), the ballet is a battle of the sexes. Image: Stephanie Berger

Materiality
Although some critics are beginning to consider the possibilities that the medium of their work affords, few have actively exploited its textual and material possibilities, the patterning of words on a page, the design of a page itself, and wondered what it would mean for criticism to take on new forms – those of art, film or even architecture itself. It is possible to consider how this kind of work positions the modes in which we practise theory and criticism to be more than a description of content, but to define critical positions in design. The ‘architecture’ of the writing of history, theory or criticism, might then take into account the structure, processes and materials of the medium employed, considering these modes as integral to the construction of the writing, indicating that the spatial practices of history, theory and criticism have a materiality, thus offering a new way of connecting with architecture through a particularly feminist and material aspect of critical spatial practice.

More recently, feminist understandings of ‘materiality’ or matter have shown how material is not only the social and economic context for architecture, but also an active ingredient in the processes of making architecture. The important work of feminist material philosophers, such as Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway and Isabelle Stengers, has provided a foundation for challenging the rise of new forms of architectural theory such as speculative realism and object-orientated ontology for their gender blindness. An important new generation of thinkers, such as Claudia Dutson, Hélène Frichot, Stephen Loo, Peg Rawes, Undine Sellbach and Katie Lloyd Thomas, consider matter from an ecological perspective where humans are interconnected with animals, insects and things. Their work rethinks the treatment of material processes in such architectural traditions as the specification. Feminist architects have also invented new kinds of details that maximise the environmental potential of architectural materials, most famously, Sarah Wigglesworth’s Straw Bale House (2001) in Islington, and Ruth Morrow in her use of textiles in making concrete.
Sarah Wigglesworth’s Straw Bale House in Islington of 2001: maximising the environmental potential of architectural materials. Image: Ben Blossom


This piece is featured in the AR’s March 2018 issue on Women in Architecture – click here to purchase a copy.