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Architecture

Why are our cities built for 6ft-tall men? The female architects who fought back

**Oliver Wainwright**

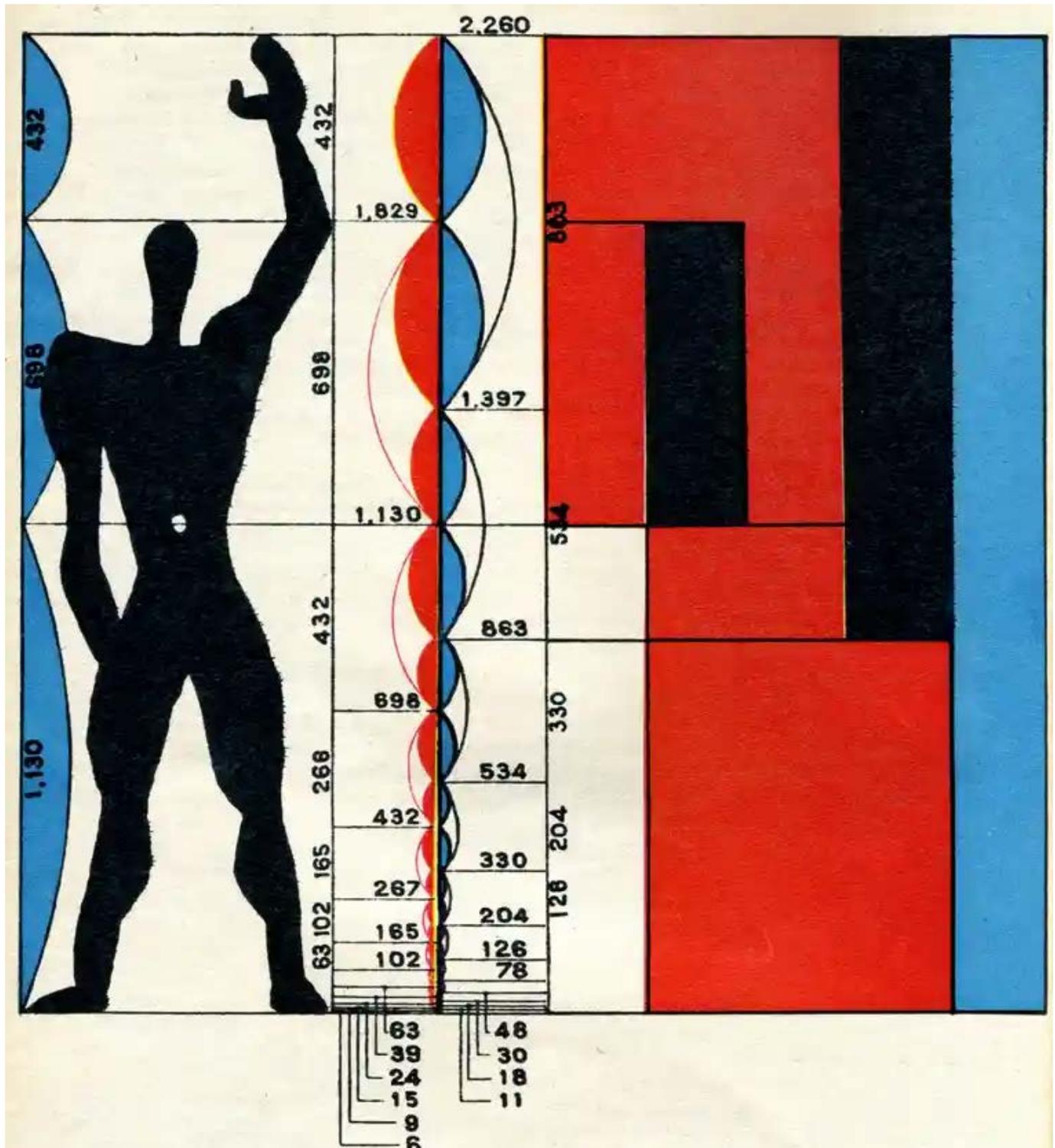
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When Le Corbusier developed his proportional system Le Modulor in the 1940s, the great architect had in mind a handsome British policeman. His system would go on to shape the entire postwar world, dictating everything from the height of a door handle to the scale of a staircase, all governed by the need to make everything as convenient as possible for this 6ft-tall ideal man. Its influence even extended to the size of city blocks, since these responded to the size and needs of the car our imaginary hero drove to work. The Swiss-born, Paris-based architect had originally proposed 1.75m, based on the average height of a Frenchman, but it later grew. “In English detective novels,” said Le Corbusier, explaining his change of mind, “the good-looking men,

such as policemen, are always 6ft tall!”

This may have created a dynamic world for the dashing man, pictured by Corbusier with bulging calves, pinched waist, broad shoulders and a huge lobster claw of a hand raised aloft. But this modernist worldview failed to account for women, as well as children, elderly and disabled people - anyone, in fact, who fell outside the statuesque ideal.



▲ Shaping the city ... Le Corbusier's Modulor. Photograph: CCI/Rex/Shutterstock

By the 1980s, some women had had enough. After decades of struggling with prams and shopping trolleys, navigating dark underpasses, blind alleyways and

labyrinthine subways in the urban obstacle course mostly made by men, it was time for a different approach. “Through lived experience,” wrote [the Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative](#), when they launched their manifesto in 1981, “women have a different perspective of their environment from the men who created it. Because there is no ‘women’s tradition’ in building design, we want to explore the new possibilities that the recent change in women’s lives and expectations have opened up.”

Forty years on and 27 years since they disbanded, the surviving members of Matrix have taken over a corner of the Barbican, as part of the London arts centre’s new Level G programme, an experimental space in the foyer designed to entertain anyone hanging around. Following the recent [vigils for Sarah Everard](#), whose murder prompted a national reckoning over women’s safety, and coming after the Black Lives Matter protests for social and spatial justice, the provocative display couldn’t open at a more fitting time.

Called [How We Live Now](#), the exhibition begins with a work by the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop, shown on Channel 4 in 1988, that documented women’s experiences of navigating [Paradise Circus](#), part of the postwar city centre conceived as an island in a gyratory roundabout, hemmed by a ring road and accessed by subways, steps and high-level walkways. A reviewer in the Daily Telegraph, who had been expecting something “amateurish, boring and full of loony leftist women” was instead enraptured by the film’s display of common sense about the ills of car-dominated planning. The makers “did not suggest any wilful discrimination”, the critic wrote, “but simply inability on the part of male architects to envisage what women actually do and need in their buildings”.

A case in point, shown in another section of the exhibition, is the Essex Women’s Refuge. The complex, designed by a male architect, had got basic things wrong, from the shared kitchen, which was far too small, to the location of the children’s play areas, which were completely separate from the main communal areas, with no visual or aural connection for passive supervision. Matrix worked on the centre in 1992. Using what became a regular tactic, they presented the women with big cardboard models of different spaces, which they could rearrange to test out different configurations, along with using ribbon marked like a ruler to measure their existing spaces, which were added to the plans as a comparison.



▲ Pioneering ... members of Matrix in the 1990s (Mo Hildenbrand, Sheelagh McManus, Raechel Ferguson (back row); Janie Grote, Annie-Louise Phiri, Julia Dwyer (front row). Photograph: Jenny Burgen

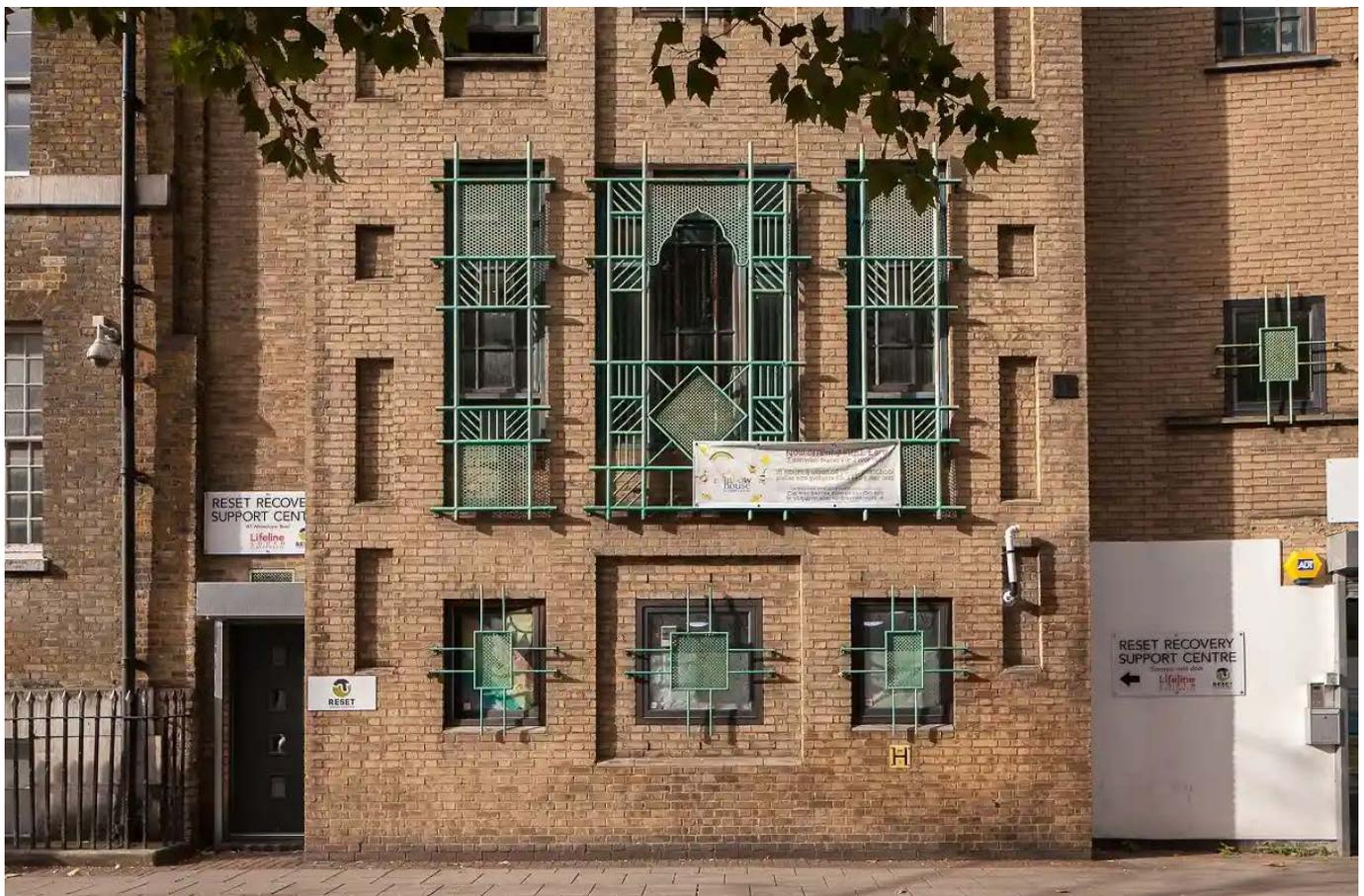
“These were all simple techniques,” says Jos Boys, a founder member of Matrix, who curated the exhibition with the Barbican’s Jon Astbury. “But they made the women feel part of creating the project. A key part of everything we did was to make the language and practice of architecture more transparent and accessible to non-experts.”

“ The key was to make the language of architecture more transparent and accessible

Boys describes what now sounds like an unimaginable heyday of community action, participatory planning, squatting, workers’ co-operatives and technical aid centres, with public money readily available. Much of what Matrix worked on was funded by the Greater London Council under Ken Livingstone, before it was abolished in 1986 by the then prime minister, Margaret Thatcher. Their projects included the groundbreaking Jagonari women’s educational resource centre in Whitechapel, east London. Working for - and with - a group of South Asian women, Matrix ran workshops with demountable models, asked the women to bring pictures of buildings from their home countries that they liked, and took them on a “brick picnic” walk to discuss what building materials and colours they preferred.

The result, completed in 1987 and now home to a childcare centre, incorporated a variety of Asian influences, deliberately not linked to any Hindu or Islamic imagery. It included decorative metal latticework over the windows, to provide both visual interest and security, mosaic patterns around the doors, squat toilets and sit-down sinks for washing large saucepans from communal meals. Every part of the building was fully wheelchair accessible too, a rarity in those days.

“They understood exactly what our requirements were without being patronising or judgmental,” wrote their client, Solma Ahmed, in a glowing tribute written three decades later, in support of an unsuccessful bid for Matrix to be retrospectively awarded the RIBA gold medal. “We said what we needed in that building: safety, security, childcare, sensitive to women’s cultural and religious needs while breaking some myths about Muslim women in particular. They were [the] perfect fit.”



▲ Groundbreaking ... Jagonari women's centre in Whitechapel, east London. Photograph: Shahed Saleem for The Survey of London.

When people have encountered Matrix in the past, they have sometimes asked what exactly feminist design looks like. How would a city designed and built by women be different? But, in Boys' mind, that misses the point. They weren't promoting a feminist aesthetic, but a way of looking, listening and designing that takes account of people's very different needs and desires, one that embodies "the richness of our multiple ways of being in the world". It's about who gets to build it, too: a large part of Matrix's work was devoted to publications, manuals and events, explaining routes

into the building trades and running training courses.

The members of the co-operative, who numbered between 12 and 16, were all paid the same, and, as public sector funding dried up, their model struggled to remain viable. While they went on to many different things - from academia to running restaurants, to setting up their own architecture practices - their short but explosive moment would inspire future generations, particularly in recent years as students have rediscovered their work. The demand is now such that Matrix's seminal 1984 book, *Making Space: Women and the Man Made Environment*, long out of print, is to be republished by Verso this year.

A final section of the exhibition includes architects, artists and film-makers who are keeping the spirit alive, such as Winnie Herbstein. Her 2018 film installation *Studwork*, which took a wrecking ball to assumptions of gendered roles in construction, featured Glasgow's Women in Construction course and the Slaghammers feminist welding group. There are the socially driven practices like Muf and Public Works, campaign groups like *Part W* and Black Females in Architecture, as well as *feminist design collective Edit*, who designed the clever structure of the exhibition itself. There might no longer be the pots of cash available from the public purse, but these practices are finding ways to carve out space for more excluded, marginal voices.

As Matrix write: "Consciously or otherwise, designers work in accordance with a set of ideas about how society operates, who or what is valued, who does what and who goes where." The question is who gets included, whose values we prioritise, and what kind of world we want to create.

[How We Live Now](#) is at the Barbican, London, until 23 December.

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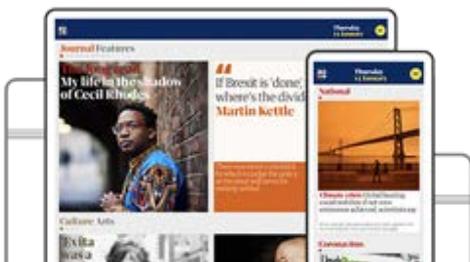
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Matrix were wonderful and inspiring. I don't agree with some of the comments below which say that now most things have free and easy access. Going to many places with children's buggies, and small children in general, can be exhausting and hazardous, not to mention travelling with luggage. And things have not got smaller due to making things accessible for smaller people, but to squeeze in as much as possible to make as big a profit as possibl...

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