

Building a Real Alternative: Women's Design Service

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Women's Design Service (WDS), based in London, is a unique organisation, which works towards a better built environment for women. This brief historical sketch charts its development within the heady political context of 1980s London. It suggests that WDS is particularly valuable in offering insight into how architecture and the built environment reproduce inequality but always in ways that depend on context. It highlights the fact that WDS has never lost sight of women's real social situation, a fact that makes its work stand out among built environment discourses.

Introduction

Women's Design Service (WDS) is dedicated to improving the built environment for women: helping them get involved in design and planning, doing research, lobbying and giving advice. Still, after over twenty years and a solid reputation, the idea of intervening in design and planning to tackle inequality remains baffling. Even for many who sympathise with feminism, the role of buildings and spatial arrangements in reproducing inequality is unclear. That WDS has put (and kept) women on the built environment agenda is worth highlighting for its own sake, but also because in the time that WDS has been operating, women have often become indistinguishable as real social beings whilst their non-standardness has been politically expedient and academically—in some circles—fashionable.

Overall, the story of WDS reflects key currents in British feminist practice in relation to the built environment.¹ Weaving together personal recollections, archival sources, published retrospectives and a sketch of the political climate, I offer a glimpse of how WDS has combined pragmatism with a commitment to reshaping the legacy of obstructions that architects, planners and engineers built into women's daily lives. I dwell particularly on the early days of WDS, showing how it threatened to collapse before it had even begun, but also how its key themes were given space and time to develop in an intellectual and professional environment that would be difficult to recreate today. A fuller treatment can be found in the published 20th anniversary history, *Doing Things Differently*,² a project that shifted my intellectual energies away from an earlier career in anthropology towards an engagement with architecture and urbanism.

Quotations in the text, unless otherwise referenced, are from interviews or email correspondence between January 2006 and June 2007 with members of or those associated with WDS. The names that appear below are ones that help progress a particular aspect of WDS' story. Thank you to all who helped with the research, and apologies and an invitation to get in touch, to anyone who feels they should have been mentioned but have not.

A Window of Opportunity: The Greater London Council

The origins of WDS coincided with interesting times in Anglo-American political culture. Arguably the 1980s marked the beginnings of a reversal of many of the social, educational and medical improvements that had been achieved through the previous two centuries.³ It saw the transformation of Canary Wharf into the centre of global capitalism. It was the period when the privatisation of public amenity, and importantly space, began to intensify and be felt particularly by women in their caring and social reproduction roles.

¹ Cf. Lynne Walker and Sue Cavanagh, 'Women's Design Service: Feminist Resources for Urban Environments', in Joan Rothschild (ed.), *Design and Feminism*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999), pp. 149-157.

² WDS/Eeva Berglund, *Doing Things Differently: Women's Design Service at 20*, (London: WDS, 2007).

³ For a discussion of the issue see: Cindi Katz, 'Power, Space and Terror: Social Reproduction and the Public Environment', in Setha Low and Neil Smith (eds), *The Politics of Public Space*, (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 111-112.

Yet the 1980s wasn't by any means just about yuppies and greed. In feminism and in architecture it was a hopeful time. Women from the New Architecture Movement (NAM) had campaigned successfully against sexism in the building press in the 1970s and progressive initiatives were developing further, partly inspired by feminist research on the built environment from the USA, by pioneering researchers like Gerda Wekerle and Dolores Hayden.⁴ The Architectural Association's 1979 conference on 'Women and Space' was an important milestone that gave a new confidence to consider and practice alternative ways of designing and building. Above all, it inspired challenges to the normative language of architectural education and an awareness of the social and political values expressed in the built environment.⁵ Interviewees recalled a range of activities that constituted a virtuous cycle, from consciousness-raising evenings where young women devoured feminist literature and came to see and experience themselves in new ways, to forms of mutual nurture to better cope with sexism as well as with the corrosive effects of the 'crit' and of the star system in architecture.

From 1980s, feminist architectural practice in Britain found a concrete and exceptionally successful manifestation in Matrix, a practice that remained steadfastly female, politically motivated and at some distance from the architectural establishment. As Julia Dwyer and Anne Thorne describe it, through Matrix women architects tapped into a broader burgeoning academic and professional interest in women's experiences: women's histories were uncovered, women's work reassessed and the naturalness of gender roles was thoroughly questioned. Alongside this, it became possible to articulate a feminist critique of the built environment as a man-made product that could and should be redesigned to empower women. These were the same arguments put forward by those who eventually founded

⁴ Gerda R. Wekerle, 'Women in the Urban Environment', *Signs Supplement*, 'Women and the American City', 5(3)(Spring, 1980); Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods and Cities*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1981).

⁵ Cf. Julia Dwyer and Anne Thorne, 'Evaluating Matrix: Notes from Inside the Collective', in Doina Petrescu (ed.), *Altering Practices: Feminist Politics and Poetics of Space*, (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 39-56.



Fig. 1. 'Women Need a Voice'. Photo: WDS picture archive, no date.

or joined WDS. Indeed there was substantial overlap and collaboration between Matrix and WDS, and the social and professional networks that developed then remain active to this day.

There was institutional support for women as well. The North London Polytechnic (later University of North London and now London Metropolitan University) was a hub of women-centred, radical architectural thinking, particularly in its innovative Women Into Architecture and Building Programme. The Feminist Architects Network (FAN) was active, and progressively minded architects who were not specifically feminists were campaigning on behalf of and working with community groups, many of which served women. There were also several community technical aid centres, largely publicly funded, offering low cost services to local groups to help them 'get the building and environmental improvements they want, rather than having to accept designs that the "experts" think they might have.'⁶ This groundswell of support for community involvement then combined with calls for women to make their voices heard and paved the way towards a politically engaged professional design and building service for women.

⁶ Association of Community Technical Aid Centres / ACTAC leaflet, no date.

What was crucial, however, was the high profile given to women and women's groups since the late 1970s by the Greater London Council (GLC). The GLC's Women's Committee, 'one of the world's best-known and generously funded experiments in municipal feminism'⁷ began work in 1982. The GLC specifically helped precipitate a breakthrough for built environment professionals, in that the Greater London Development Plan of 1984 included a chapter called 'Women in London', which posited the need for planning policies to address 'the economic and social disadvantage of women'.⁸ The process of drawing up that plan had explicitly brought in a recognition of gender inequality and the fact that a 'man-made world' was making life difficult for a majority of the population. Then in 1985, the Women's Committee organised a 'Women and Planning' seminar and published a research and design guidance folder, *Changing Places: Positive Action on Women and Planning*, in 1986.⁹ The document makes clear that there remained a lot of work to counteract men's oppressive attitudes and practices and that the establishment had a duty to progress this work.

⁷ Sylvia Bashevkin, *Women on the Defensive: Living Through Conservative Times*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 16.

⁸ 'Women in London', in *Greater London Development Plan: As Proposed to be Altered by the Greater London Council*, (London: GLC, 1984), p. 87.

⁹ Greater London Council, *Changing Places: Positive Action on Women and Planning*, (London: GLC, 1986).

Meanwhile the founding members of WDS were working for Support: Architectural Design Resources for the Community, effectively a community technical aid centre. Since the middle of the 1970s it had provided 'architectural design resources for community organisations, the voluntary sector and co-operatives'.¹⁰ For example, it worked with community groups on new buildings and conversion projects, through feasibility studies, designing, supervising works and devising maintenance programmes. A co-operative, it was explicitly sympathetic to feminist goals, as the following extract from its brochure explains.

¹⁰ Support promotional leaflet, no date.

Working with projects that relate specifically to women's needs and interests enables the women workers in our co-operative to give practical support to the women's movement as well as contributing to developing a socialist/feminist perspective on the built environment.¹¹

¹¹ Support Community Building Design Ltd, no date.

Tenants' associations with many female activists and women's groups were prominent among its actual and potential clients, and it made sense to seek funding for a dedicated women's service. The women involved approached the GLC's Women's Committee who, indeed, promised funding. This was a politically driven, pragmatic move that took advantage of the unique political and economic circumstances. Two workers, the architects Julia Wilson Jones and Anne Sawyer, took up their posts in the spring of 1984 in an office space in Ferdinand Place, Camden.

By October 1984 the management committee included the political activist, Linda Bellos who went to work for the GLC soon thereafter, Elsie Owusu and Amanda Reynolds, both architects, and Nelica LaGro, who worked for Support, and ten others. As in Support, the core activity was community technical aid and with so many fledgling women's groups on the political landscape, there was never any shortage of work. It is not, therefore, quite accurate to say that WDS was set up against a background of dynamic and fertile interest in progressive and politicised professional work. Rather, from its very beginnings, WDS was creating that 'background', coming up with and developing new ideas and strategies for eroding male dominance in a professional arena that was—and remains—particularly noteworthy in its reluctance to acknowledge or accept women.

Setting the Foundations for Real Expertise on Real Women

WDS' activities from 1984 to 1986 have left only a thin trace. There is, however, in the London Metropolitan Archives, in the minutes of the GLC's Grants Projects Team meeting of 4th September 1985, a mention of WDS as a recipient of funds. In the summer of 1986 the trace picks up once again. A memo dated 4th August 1986 suggests that something, somewhere had been going on.

Women's Design Service has recently had confirmation of funding from the London Borough's Grant Scheme for two full time workers. We are taking this opportunity to rethink the structure and workload of WDS after a year of uncertainty and loss of direction. [...] We are proposing new aims for Women's Design Service, which will enable it to concentrate more on design issues relevant to all women using the man-made environment, with priority on projects affecting black and ethnic minority women and other groups of women particularly disadvantaged by the built environment.

Feminist and grassroots initiatives were then at the frontlines of wider battles between radical and conservative ideologies. Soon after Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives took power at national level in 1979, Ken Livingstone—Red Ken—took office as leader of the GLC. A prolonged and often bitterly personal conflict followed, which ended in the abolition of metropolitan government, including the GLC. Among other things, it meant reductions in the resourcing of the voluntary sector and was a setback for feminism. In time, Conservative policies also led to a tangible worsening of services that many of the most vulnerable women relied on, and eventually eroded women's status and opportunities more broadly.¹² That WDS survived the difficult mid-1980s was thus down to the efforts of a handful of people. One was a GLC grants officer Bramwell Osula (in the documentation as Ossulu), who later recalled that a lot of people 'worked very hard to pull off what was then seen as a major funding coup'.

¹² Cf. Bashevkin, *Women on the Defensive*.

It has not been possible to establish the exact sequence of events or even establish who the main protagonists were. One who was definitely involved was Angela Diamandidou. She had been a planner-architect but after the birth of her child found it impossible to continue in her job. She was approached by a member of the management committee as someone who had the contacts and skills to help save WDS. When I interviewed her, she raised a key question about the prospects for feminist architectural work, 'somebody well intentioned was trying to set this up. But there was already Matrix. How many clients are there? How could you sustain a group mostly on designing for women?' The solution that the GLC agreed to—just before its abolition—was to move away from providing architectural services to clients and make the organisation a research-based information and support centre.

To kick-start the organisation a development worker, Jos Boys was recruited. She had architectural training, had been a founder member of Matrix and had already worked on several publications including the GLC's, *Changing Places*. Her perspective was both academic and political, and her vision for the organisation was rooted in her frustration over the way that the experiences of working for women's projects weren't building up into a widely available body of expertise. Perhaps WDS could find a new role here, by turning towards research. The steering group then 'agreed that [...] the short term objective should be to develop a resource and information base on women and built environment issues.' As opposed to feasibility studies, WDS would 'provide a useful service in offering a "pre-feasibility" information [sic] to groups to help them clarify their building needs.' By the end of 1986, three workers had embarked on a number of research projects and were organising a conference on 'Women in a Man-made World'.¹³ The practicalities and organisational framework of the resuscitated organisation were not quickly resolved, but even against a background of uncertain funding, elusive trustees, and lack of material resources, with its three project workers, Jos Boys and a handful of

¹³ Report dated 4th September 1986, WDS files.

committed trustees, WDS was on its way to becoming an innovative as well as influential voice.

Changing Places gave high-level support and an evidence base from which to work, one that also informed at least some local planning authorities. Around the country, meanwhile, there was an acceptance within local government to fund social or community buildings. Beyond the UK, books and academic papers on women and the built environment showed a marked rise in the late 1980s¹⁴ with women's safety in urban areas in particular, receiving considerable attention.¹⁵ WDS contributed to the debate with one of its earliest events, a seminar on women's safety on housing estates. The perspective and practical activities that began to develop then are still part of its 'Making Safer Places' toolkit. The methods it developed, like neighbourhood audits carried out with residents, made it impossible to reduce problems to their technical components.

The reborn organisation was positioned as distinct from practices working directly with clients. WDS developed an approach that treated design as dynamic and social, and which led to developing tools that integrated a wide range of issues. Designing buildings and spaces was an important element but not the only one. WDS brought together networks with varied interests, architects but also planners, government officers, tenants and residents and quickly established itself as a contact point for all those interested in women and the built environment. Lynne Walker and Sue Cavanagh were both involved with WDS for a long time, and provide an overview in their chapter published in 1999. It identifies the constants that were present from the start and have continued since their text was published, notably always involving a wide range of people and using a broad repertoire of ways to reach its potential audience. The connecting thread has always been the blunt reality that 'women's experience is that they bear the brunt of poor environments'.¹⁶

A Social Approach

It was no doubt significant that none of the three workers of the new organisation were fully qualified architects. They framed the task of making better spaces within a social, context-specific set of challenges, drawing from their own past experiences. Vron Ware brought journalistic competence as well as campaign skills, having already worked for Friends of the Earth and in anti-racist initiatives. Rosy Martin trained as an industrial designer, worked as a photographer and was active in campaigning for a more democratic and progressive future for London. Sue Cavanagh's interest in art and design took her to North London Polytechnic where she first heard of WDS.

The work they undertook involved first finding out what women's concerns were. This required time-consuming surveys of the uses of specific spaces

¹⁴ Cf. Joan Rothschild and Victoria Rosner; 'Feminisms and Design: Review Essay', in *Design and Feminism: Re-Visioning Spaces, Places and Everyday Things*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Cf. Carolyn Whitzman, 'The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner: Long-term Feminist Planning Initiatives in London, Toronto, Montreal, and Melbourne', *Planning Theory and Practice*, 8(2)(2007): 203-225.

¹⁶ Walker and Cavanagh, 'Women's Design Service', p. 150.



Fig. 2. WDS staff around 1987. Photo: WDS.

and much talking. With varying levels of self-conscious theorising, they saw the problems as social rather than technical. They thought hard about roles and activities and about the uses of space through time. They considered maintenance and staffing, things that clearly impact experiences of the built environment but that were—and are—routinely overlooked by many designers. They emphasised that an environment could never be singular, that it is experienced at different times and from different vantage points in very different ways. As a result of this kind of empirically based and practical understanding, and of trying to take nothing for granted, their research highlighted differences among women from the beginning.

In this it was at the forefront of feminist practice, understanding the category ‘woman’ in a complex and theoretically sophisticated manner from the start. Ever since then, its literature highlighted the crosscutting impacts of different dimensions of inequality and discrimination, and the fact that the implications of this are usually specific to context. Nor did it shirk from difficult questions—something that, according to interviewees, made both Matrix and WDS particularly exciting places to work. WDS even explicitly problematised its own foundations. ‘Identifying “women” as a subject and topic of research and concern can project a homogenous image or [...] foster the idea of biologically determined “woman”’,¹⁷ and was not helpful given that they were trying to get away from the stereotyping that was making life hard for women in the first place. The solutions were usually found in eclecticism, from its very hands-on approach, and through treating buildings and spaces not as design objects but as actual and possible experiences.

The working culture was also significant. One interviewee noted that they ‘were highly autonomous as an organisation, initially individually as well.

¹⁷ Walker and Cavanagh, ‘Women’s Design Service’, p. 151.

¹⁸ Women's Design Service, *It's Not all Swings and Roundabouts: Making Better Play Spaces for the Under-sevens*, (London: WDS, 1988).

¹⁹ Women's Design Service, *Thinking of Small Children: Access, Provision and Play*, (London: WDS, 1988).

We had weekly meetings and lots of other little sessions. It was [...] all women, academics, practitioners, architects, landscape architects.' The first projects dealt with themes that have been picked up and developed further over the years and particularly, given the personal preoccupations of those involved, on parents with small children. *It's Not all Swings and Roundabouts*¹⁸ explored provision for under-sevens. Inspired by disability organisations' successes in promoting more accessible design, *Thinking of Small Children*¹⁹ approached everyday experiences of shopping from the perspective of a carer with a double-pushchair, and resulted in guidelines that were taken up by local authorities and supermarkets and that were beginning to be accepted as desirable by progressive councils and corporations, some of which were collaborators and/or part funders of WDS' work.



Fig. 3. In-store childcare facilities in Ikea, London, recommended by WDS as an example of good practice, around 1986. Photo: WDS.

Urban safety and fear of violence was, from the start, another area where WDS' practical, dynamic and socially embedded perspective produced powerful results and nurtured a view of feminism that took it far beyond the focus on motherhood. WDS' research showed how different contexts and times influenced safety and perceptions of safety. It was concerned that 'the concept of women's safety [is] being reduced to a technical issue, to be resolved by the "experts"—architects, planners, housing researchers and academics in conjunction with the police' and wanted to 'promote an alternative view [...] that security does not just equal freedom from crime and that tenants should have far more say and control over their own environments if they are to feel secure in their own homes.'²⁰ It argued against more standard, that is, white, feminist views that automatically posited the home as a space of oppression, or that overlooked cultural variations in women's behaviour and experiences.

²⁰ Vron Ware, 'Problems with Design Improvements at Home', *Town and Country Planning*, (56)(October 1987): 265.

²¹ WDS' insistently situated and political work could be seen as a real-life affirmation of the kind of contingency Jeremy Till argues has been wished away from architectural thought and practice, 'Architecture and Contingency', *Field*, 1(1)(2007): 120-135, available; www.field-journal.org, [accessed May 2008].

In an advertising flyer from around 1987, under the heading 'What can the Women's Design Service do for you?' advice is offered based on its own research, on design for disability, pollution in the home, design of nurseries, education and training for women entering the building professions, consultation procedures, and women and transport. Planning authorities and organisations involved with building were contacting them at a rate they could not keep up with, even as political events were bringing in an increasingly anti-feminist climate. Their analysis was academically informed but grounded all their work in empirical findings and current concerns. This meant that unlike many architects they were always willing to deal with complexity and contingency.²¹ It was not always an easy task but it seems they were well enough resourced to work through some of the early challenges in incredibly constructive ways. And so their early innovations established a secure enough foundation for WDS to overcome the problems that it has since encountered.

Equal Opportunity at Work

If the challenge of undoing white male dominance was difficult, putting equal opportunity into practice was hardly straightforward. Moreover, this was the era of explicit identity politics when local authority funding bodies and many others encouraged the assumption that an individual's race, gender and sexuality directly influenced their work. At WDS this periodically led to an imperative to recruit more minority, particularly black, women. Although there was a recognition that it could also be problematic to link identity and professional legitimacy, given that the organisation was specifically geared towards the problems of minorities, their participation at professional level should be promoted as well.

WDS appears to have been drawn quite early on into a typical struggle in women's organisations about the exact meaning of equal opportunity, whether as employers or as service providers. This developed through a series of discussions and meetings with the steering group whose traces can only be found in the archives and whose details were understandably difficult, perhaps even unpleasant, for them to recall twenty years later. It is significant, however, because it illustrates the kinds of pitfalls that those dealing with minority rights had to navigate, and because WDS' constructive resolution of the issue was probably reflective of how it negotiated similar complexities around discrimination in its professional work.

The situation in broad outline was that in 1987, when the organisation was recruiting new workers, attempts to advertise widely in ethnic minority papers produced disappointingly few black applicants. The shortlist of suitable candidates was therefore felt to be unrepresentative by some on the steering committee. After a heated meeting one member wrote to the workers explaining that she thought the deliberations of the

selection committee were racist because they had refused to contemplate interviewing all the black applicants, whether or not they met the application criteria. Significantly, she later resigned and it was decided that one of the jobs would not be re-advertised with an explicit call for a black woman to fill the post.

Those whom I interviewed recalled awkward discussions about whether or not they were diverse enough as a group to reflect the identities of their client communities. This entailed comments about the status of the three workers who were judged to be insufficiently representative. One was asked to qualify whether she was black or not, another insisted in writing that they were not all 'white, middle-class heterosexuals'. Then, as at other times, there was debate about the tendency of WDS projects to identify women with mothers, and about the biological essentialism and hetero-normative assumptions that this sustained.

If the process had been painful and exhausting, in hindsight, they considered it part of a learning curve for politically engaged individuals and groups operating in a world of discrimination, and it ultimately influenced the way they worked. The feminist maxim that 'the personal is political' lived in the decisions they made each week and day, about how to organise one's time, where to be and what to prioritise, how to push political goals whilst avoiding tokenism and seeking to maintain high professional standards. And as a place to work, WDS made it possible for the workers to negotiate problems in an 'incredibly flexible and enlightened way' as Vron Ware put it, particularly in relation to childcare and workplace issues. She also later recalled that it should not have come as a surprise that they were not getting many applications from black women. 'We put adverts in all the ethnic minority papers', but given that women's organisations were even then insecurely funded, it was clear that they were unlikely to attract candidates from marginalised sections of the population. Working for WDS, she suggested, was more likely to attract people with a 'certain kind of feminist voluntary sector sensibility' associated with a culture that itself 'was already waning'.

If preoccupation about identity and tokenism cast shadows over WDS, its projects provided a way out. It turned its attention towards women and emphasised the value of respecting their knowledge and experience.

Pathbreaking Publications

By all accounts, the work benefited hugely from not being rushed. All those I interviewed who had worked in the early years highlighted the fact that they were able to work slowly, learn on the job and do it thoroughly. They also felt that their efforts had brought change and most of them talked about their time at WDS as an exciting moment in their lives. Later they recalled their pride and satisfaction that the buggy and baby-changing

symbols they had designed turned into routine and mundane elements of built landscapes. They knew that their;

[B]ooks were bought by some of the big supermarkets; they developed their parking spaces [...] after WDS suggested them. We may not have been the only source but we were certainly an influence.

Although the idea of tackling discrimination through design was in the air by the late 1980s, and even though it is difficult to measure the impact of any particular player, there is no doubt that WDS' efforts in those early years were significant. Beyond WDS, architects and planners with feminist sympathies clearly benefited from its efforts, gaining legitimacy for their own innovations. The architect and long-time collaborator of WDS, Anne Thorne, felt it was important that WDS generated explorative and independent research that was professionally disseminated. It helped support the work of architects who were interested in the clients and their needs and who questioned standard practice. Whether or not an explicit interest in the clients is a specifically female way of doing things is debatable, but it is something that most interviewees emphasised. Another architect who occasionally collaborated with WDS in its early years was Sue Francis, who made the point that WDS, along with Matrix, politicised design and architecture 'because they asked difficult questions.' Clara Greed, one-time Management Committee member and now Professor of Urban Planning, saw WDS as 'sparking something off' and producing 'seminal' and 'inspirational' work, always linking it back to the practical needs of designers and planners.

By late 1987 WDS had six part-time workers. Most interviewees were in general agreement with the comment of one, that no organisation would now, in the early 21st century, be run like WDS was in those days. Another commented that initially, they were like 'half a dozen loose cannons'. Yet the results speak for themselves. In the first year after being reconstituted as a research organisation, they produced several publications and contributed to many others, ran a conference and created an exhibition showcasing the work of WDS, *Built for Women?* The following year they produced two more publications and the Cockpit Gallery collaborated with WDS on making *It's Not All Swings and Roundabouts* into an exhibition and a slide pack. The positive feedback WDS received even included a letter from New Zealand to inquire about the possibility of materials being sent for use there. The guestbook for the exhibition itself glows with praise: 'Magic!' gushed one visitor, and 'I really want to get the planners from my local borough to see this exhibition and take its ideas on board' wrote another. Press coverage was hugely positive and a 'steady stream of requests for information and speakers to address conferences and run workshops' followed.

²² An updated version, *Gender and the Built Environment*, is now being produced as an online resource in collaboration with Queen Mary University of London's Geography Department and funded through Urban Buzz. See wds.org.uk for updates on progress.

²³ London Strategic Policy Unit, *Women on the Move: Women and Transport Survey: 8. Lesbians*, (London: GLC, 1989).

Making a Place for Women: A Resource Handbook on Women and the built environment was launched in October 1989.²² *Women on the Move*²³ was part of a large piece of research originally commissioned by the GLC. As a consequence of the abolition of the GLC, it was never fully completed and WDS published the text itself so breaking the mould of equating women with mothers.

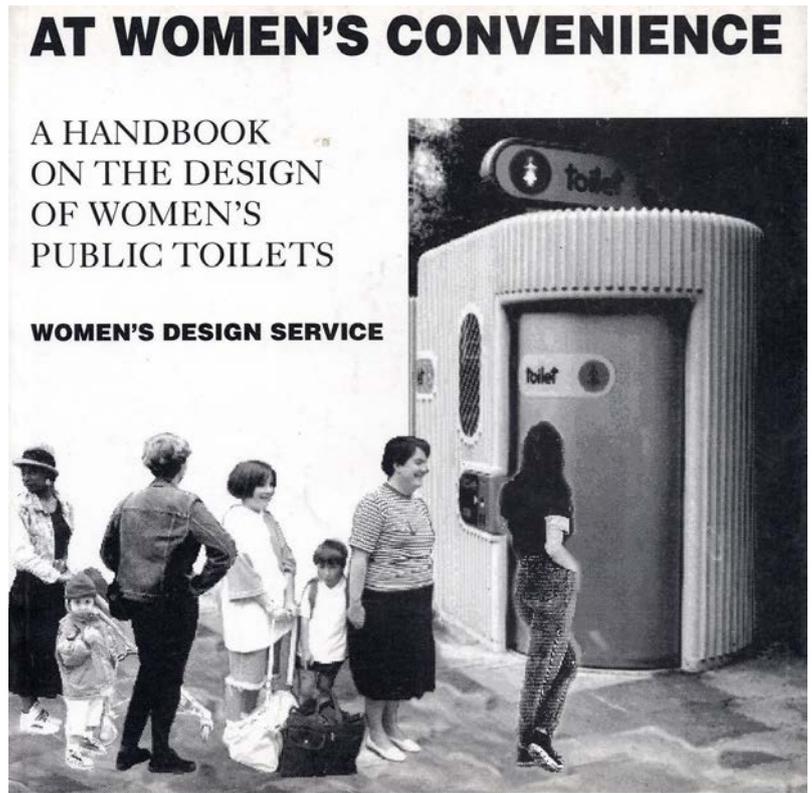


Fig. 4. *At Women's Convenience*, book cover, 1990. Photo: WDS.

At Women's Convenience is one of WDS' all-time great successes. The 'toilet book' demonstrated the extent to which an issue of particular concern to women is potentially a problem for anyone. Although the inadequacies and the absence of public toilets are far more problematic for women than for men, the research indicated that provision was far higher for men than for women. It 'firmly establish[ed] WDS as a leading voice in improving design for women in the built environment' as WDS' Annual Report (1991) put it. It consists of a history of public conveniences, followed by a research-based report on the current situation and a detailed design guide. Besides incorporating existing regulations the book devoted considerable space to maintenance and staffing, a feature that emerged out of WDS' concern with the use of the built environment over time.

The book also captured the public imagination. Under the headline, 'Desperate Measures' Anne Karpf wrote in *The Guardian* newspaper that 'now women's toilets have been candidly scrutinised and found wanting. Women's Design Service [...] has compiled the first comprehensive study

²⁴ Anne Karpf, “‘Venturing into Most Public Ladies’ Loos Takes Nerves of Steel’: Desperate Measures”, *The Guardian*, 11 July 1990, p.17.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Women’s Design Service, *Accessible Offices*, (London: WDS, 1993).

of women’s public conveniences in Britain’.²⁴ Media coverage also helped during the research phase, making it easier to solicit the nation’s views. BBC Radio 4’s ‘Woman’s Hour’ did an item on it which led to an influx of passionate letters. Also, interviewees recalled that the issue was raised by women MPs who operated in an environment, Westminster, that was designed and built as if women did not exist. *At Women’s Convenience* received excellent media coverage also because the book was launched with the collaboration of the USA-based ice-cream manufacturer Häagen Dazs, whose first outlet was opened in London’s Leicester Square in May 1990 and where, as part of the launch, WDS staff gave journalists tours of public toilets. *The Guardian* dubbed the newly opened shop ‘a beacon of quality in a sea of mediocrity.’²⁵ Perhaps the praise rubbed off on the Women’s Design Service. In any case, since then WDS workers have frequently found themselves approached as experts on women’s toilets.

Designing Housing for Older Women was a pioneering piece of research on a neglected yet numerically significant and growing section of the population, and was remembered by many interviewees as typical of the forward-looking work of WDS; it was awarded a RIBA research grant and included case-studies, academically informed analysis and recommendations. *WEB Newsletter of Women in the Built Environment*, which had its origins in a number of informal initiatives, finally came under their wing in 1987. A few years later it was effectively replaced by Broad sheets: briefings on specific topics, sometimes based on seminars, talks or ongoing projects that were published, often in collaboration with the London Women and Planning Forum, until the early 2000s. Some research never made it into the world as fully-fledged publications. Two early manuscripts that did get finished were ‘Women with Disabilities and Office Work’ and ‘Women and Sports Centre Buildings’. Parts of the former project were, in 1993, finally published as *Accessible Offices*.²⁶

Until 1990 WDS ran as a co-operative structure, and that is how its early workers remember it. Through the early 1990s there was increasing concern with restructuring the organisation and with defining its role and users. Much of this was driven by funding considerations. Strings were often attached to grants stipulating that all expenditure should be tracked and staff be properly accountable to a management group. As urban government itself began to consume vast amounts of consultancy, WDS moved back towards community support. A significant new departure for WDS was starting work in 1994 on the so-called ‘Five Estates’ in Peckham, where it provided support to tenants. This was one of the largest regeneration partnerships that the country had ever seen, funded by central government.

The emphasis slowly moved back towards working for people, community organisations and tenants’ groups, as part of the emerging web of regeneration partnerships produced in the 1990s, with research and

publication becoming only one, if still crucial, element of its work. However, WDS' main aims have remained largely the same as they were at the start. Pragmatism and changing political fashions have had impact on its style of working and funding, but in 2008 it still remains a contact point for anyone interested in women and the built environment.

Concluding Thoughts

The 1980s were a significant period for feminism, and so it is not surprising that the direction WDS took then has stamped its work ever since. In the 21st century WDS is still feminist and rights based. It has continued to develop familiar themes, entered new collaborations and nurtured old ones, and it has ventured into new territory as opportunities have arisen. Among its more inventive foci have been exploring cycling from a women's perspective and expanding its work on safety into a specific focus on parks, published in 2007 as *What to Do About Women's Safety in Parks*.²⁷

Periods of financial insecurity have been endemic from the beginning, but even with limited resources it has sustained a unique portfolio of expertise. Arguably this is more urgently needed than ever. Women's experiences are still low on the agenda and when they are prominent, women as flesh and blood social beings still get ignored, erased or misrepresented. In built environment discourse and practice, abstract notions of 'other' and 'different' invoke female attributes and experiences but rarely connect to women's concrete realities. Routinely in recent years, women have been pressed into rhetorical service as an alternative or transgressive or otherwise supposedly eye-catching feature of a professional contribution or political platform.²⁸ In stark contrast to this, WDS keeps its eye on women as real victims and real agents.

If it has survived as such, an unusual organisation, it is I believe, largely due to this commitment to the empirical, which was laid down first in the work of Support and then in the team that constituted WDS in the mid to late 1980s. It seems likely that this was made possible by the working culture of the organisation. This too, was contingent. More than once as a possible response to a funding crisis, the possibility was raised that WDS should become part of some kind of academic institute. 'It's interesting that we remained independent,' an interviewee recalled. Perhaps, in fact, it was more than interesting, it was fundamental to enabling WDS to take risks, explore and to expand horizons in the way it did.

²⁷ WDS/Anne Thorne Architects' Partnership, *What to do About Women's Safety in Parks: From A to Y*, (London: WDS/Anne Thorne, 2007).

²⁸ For a discussion of the issues see: Mary McLeod, 'Everyday and "Other" spaces', in Jane Rendell et al. (eds.) *Gender, Space, Architecture*, (London: Routledge, 2000).

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vol.2 (1)

