Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction
Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner, and Iain Borden, eds.
Routledge, 2000
432 pages, 22 illustrations
$29.99 (paper)

Gender Space Architecture is the newest addition to a now considerable number of works of collected essays dealing with issues of gender and the built environment. But to dismiss this recent work as just the latest would be to miss a great opportunity to more fully understand the complexities, history, and literature of this area of study. Gender Space Architecture distinguishes itself from previous compilations by including excerpts from seminal feminist texts as well as essays dealing with space and architecture. As such, it is of great value to the educator. In the editors’ introductions to each of the book’s three sections, Gender, Gender Space, and Gender Space Architecture, they explain the context, chronology, impact, and position of the essays that follow. This framework allows each contribution to be understood in relation to the others and to the larger concepts of feminism, space, and design. As an interdisciplinary work, this compilation also allows us to understand the parallels in the investigations of gender in a variety of disciplines such as anthropology, cultural studies, geography, art history, and philosophy. The choice of essays is pluralistic and diverse.

Part one, Gender, is arranged chronologically and includes excerpts from feminist texts that range from Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own (1929) to Judith Butler’s Subversive Bodily Acts (1990). Feminist debates about equality, difference, political agency, representation, and essentialism are covered here. Part two, Gender Space, focuses on issues of gender outside of architecture. This section gives credit to the pioneering work done in the fields of sociology, anthropology, psychology, and geography, and in particular to the work of British feminists such as Shirley Ardener, Liz Bondi, Doreen Massey, Gillian Rose, and Linda McDowell.

Much of the work of these scholars has provided the models for the current investigations in the field of architecture that are surveyed in part three, Gender Space Architecture. Here the essays are arranged chronologically to demonstrate the historical changes in both feminism and architectural practice and the shift from modern to postmodern issues. The feminist issues of equality for women and their inclusion in architectural practice raised in the 1970s are dealt with in essays such as Sara Boutelle’s “Julia Morgan,” Lynne Walker’s “Women in Architecture,” and Denise Scott Brown’s “Sexism and the Star System in Architecture.” Dolores Hayden, Frances Bradshaw, and Karen Franck speculate on the issue of difference with essays on gendered spaces and women’s ways of designing. The remaining essays by Beatriz Colomina, Zeynep Celik, Alice Friedman, Diane Agrest, Jennifer Bloomer, and Elizabeth Diller deal with the postmodern issues of representation, colonialism, subjectivity, the body, and performativity, and Henry Urbach’s “Closets, Clothes, diClosure” and Joel Sander’s “Cadet Quarters, U.S. Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs,” provide recent examples from queer theory and explorations of constructions of masculinity.

Here in one volume a student or teacher can find the origins and explanations of almost every theoretical buzzword now commonly used. Words, such as difference, the Other, marginality, desire, the Gaze, performativity, and colonization, can be read in a context that explains them. Some of the classic phrases of feminism (now often used as soundbites)—such as “a room of one’s own,” the “feminine mystique,” and “the problem with no name”—can be understood in their original context. In addition, the bibliography is perhaps one of the most extensive of its kind.

An interesting point raised by the book, however, centers around the word feminist. The editors of Gender Space Architecture clearly chose to steer clear of the F word in its title. They explain this in their general introduction: “Feminist theory has become gender theory . . . gender has replaced feminism as a less politicised, more neutral and descriptive rather than prescriptive term,” while asserting at the same time that “to talk of gender is still to take a political position.” Yet this is clearly a feminist work. There are no anti-feminist essays or reconsiderations such as Susan Faludi’s Backlash, and only three male authors have been allowed to speak. The work the editors have chosen to include, in particular their insertion of Leslie Kanes Weisman’s manifesto as a prologue and bell hooks’s essay as epilogue—two forceful, clearly feminist works—support this observation. Why not then identify this book as feminist? Although feminists can be critical of this, it could be argued that Gender Space Architecture does them a service. By framing feminist theory as historical and as a category called “gender,” it diffuses the loaded stereotypes that the word feminism now contains. This book provides a neutral framework for those who might steer clear of feminist work to come to some understanding of it. Those who might never pick up The Second Sex, for example, get a glimpse of it here.
Gender Space Architecture celebrates feminism by disseminating both its history and ideals. The editors’ dilemma with regard to the term feminism only further educates us about its current problematic state. At the same time, they have meticulously excerpted the most essential portions of the selected essays, without compromising the integrity of the complete work. This gives this volume diversity and depth, and allows many different sides of an issue to be explicated. The result is one of the most thorough and far-reaching compilations on this subject—and perhaps the most accessible.

Lucinda J. Kaukas
Virginia Commonwealth University

Gender and Architecture
Louise Durning and Richard Wrigley, eds.
John Wiley & Sons, 2000
218 pages, illustrated
$40.00

Belying its generic title, Gender and Architecture is actually a very precise collection of essays, each one attempting to historicize the discourse of gender in premodern or early modern architectural practice. As gender studies have already found some accommodation within the fabric of architectural analysis, this book should be understood as a text that is intent on expanding our basic understanding regarding the relationship between gender and the production of architecture, rather than promoting a specific polemical justification for its relevance.

In a fairly eclectic mix of papers, nine works are organized through a loose historical chronology with topics ranging from the allegories of freedom and escape in literary architecture of the sixteenth century to the role of female clients during the French Enlightenment to the analysis of gender attitudes represented by the Brücke artists in early twentieth century Germany.

Three of the most compelling essays focus on gender issues within the urban context. Although each offers theoretically rich insights in their own right, the three also suggest a type of chronological mapping of the European city from the seventeenth to the twentieth century in terms of visuality, commodification, and gender definition.

Christy Anderson, in “A Gravity in Public Places: Inigo Jones and Classical Architecture,” looks at Inigo Jones’s work as an attempt to move British architecture beyond the vernacular, to establish a code of masculinity or gravitas in the public realm through the importation of classicism from continental Europe. Anderson argues that Jones transcended Alberti’s distinctions between interior and exterior, and established a more specific dichotomy based on assumed qualities of gender. He believed the exterior of the building, like the character of a sixteenth-century Englishman, should offer an image of restraint, while the interior of the building might represent a more volatile “feminine” nature with a mixture of invented styles. Through establishing this binary relationship, control was established over the interior by the exterior, reiterating societal control of the masculine over the feminine.

In an analysis of early nineteenth-century England, Jane Rendell suggests in “Ramblers and Cyprians: Mobility, Visuality and the Gendering of Architectural Spaces” that such simple dichotomies between public and private, exterior and interior, masculine and feminine were beginning to be problematized as London was transformed into a spatial fabric that promoted urban movement and economic exchange. Rendell writes,

In the early nineteenth century increasing urbanization and the expansion of capitalism resulted in the rising cultural importance of certain spaces of leisure, consumption, display and exchange. These were sites for conflicting concerns, those of public patriarchs seeking to control female occupation of the city, worried that their female property—mothers, wives and daughters—would be visually and sexually available to other men, and those of the consumer capitalist aiming to extend the roles of women as cheap workers and consumers in the city. (p. 135)

To understand this new condition, Rendell examines two types of urban characters to emerge during this period: the “rambler,” the socially acceptable upper-middle-class male consumer, and the “cyprian,” the equally mobile and visible female character of questionable reputation. Through the analysis of these two, she suggests that a much more complex relationship had emerged in terms of contemporary gender relations in which the female cyprian had begun to disrupt the male hegemony of the public sphere.

Extending Rendell’s argument into the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Esther da Costa Meyer in “La Donna è Mobile” examines the relationship between an emerging agoraphobia amongst middle-class female city dwellers and the transformation of the city into an even more complete site of capitalist exchange. Stricken by the “anxiety of possibility,” these women
represent a type of paradoxical resistance (via their neurosis) of the difficulties and contingences of the capitalist city as discussed earlier by Rendell:

[Agoraphobia] speaks, after all the same symbolic language as patriarchal society: the gendered antinomy between interior and exterior space reasserts the economic (active) function of the male and the “non-productive” (passive) one of the middle class female. Agoraphobia represents a virtual parody of twentieth century constructions of femininity. (p. 162)

In three essays, one comes to see the city, not as a fixed material entity, but as a complex set of layered experiences modulated and transformed through history rather than resolved by it.

Two other strong essays in the collection deal specifically with the private realm, more specifically, the convent and the harem. Helen Hill in “Architecture as Metaphor for the Body: The Case of Female Convents in Early Modern Italy” argues that the convent is not merely a physical structure in which social identity is constructed, but can be considered a larger metaphor “standing in metonymically for that body which is made publicly invisible through that very architecture” (p. 75). In “Harems and Hotels: Segregated City Spaces and Narratives of Identity in the Work of Oriental Women Writers,” Reina Lewis explores the experiences of female cultural interlopers moving between East and West, exposing the inevitable contingencies and paradoxes of “otherness” in regard to gender definitions both in England as well as in Istanbul. Both authors build their arguments around the work of Henri Lefebvre to support the notion that, in the end, a particular space is not a neutral container, but a contested product both conditioning and conditioned by contemporary social relations.

Much of Gender and Architecture focuses on historical issues of gender and architecture within the European context, and does not deal with the American spatial experience in any direct way. Instead, its most important contribution as a collection is that it offers a set of original case studies rich in factual specifics and theoretical depth, thus allowing a student to approach issues of gender and architecture in a perhaps more quantifiable and historically grounded way than typically allowed for by other more polemically driven texts on this topic to date.

Designing for Diversity: Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Architectural Profession
Kathryn H. Anthony
University of Illinois Press, 2001
256 pages, 14 photographs
$34.95 (cloth)

The architectural profession remains largely unaware of—or insensitive to—diversity issues. In her well-researched book, Designing for Diversity, Kathryn H. Anthony provides an important corrective. The book identifies and reclaims the architectural contributions of women and people of color that have often gone unrecognized, and, to a lesser extent, those of gay and lesbian architects. Through surveys and interviews, she gives voice to those who are under-represented, analyzes their status within the profession, and suggests the benefits of opening up the field to a more diverse group of practitioners. As a result, the book is a call to the profession to change and transform.

There have been and continue to be analyses of architecture through the lens of gender, race, and sexuality. But Anthony is not interested in examining spaces and buildings. Instead, she focuses on the work environment. Anthony argues that the architectural profession in the United States is twenty-five years behind the times with regard to discrimination and curriculum. Figures from early 2000 confirm her assessment, when only sixteen percent of architects in the United States were women, four percent Hispanic, and two percent African American. Among those licensed to practice in the 1999 AIA membership, only ten percent were women and eight percent persons of color. Among full-time architectural faculty in American colleges and universities, only sixteen percent are women and just ten percent are persons of color. As stated by one respondent (white male, age thirty-six): “It [the architectural profession] is a white male club and the clients are also typically white male.”

Anthony also documents discriminatory acts. Sixty-eight percent of survey respondents had seen or heard about gender discrimination in an architectural office, and forty-four percent had personally experienced it. Forty-two percent had seen or heard about racial discrimination in an office, and eighteen percent had personally experienced it. Double standards and limited opportunities for employment, networking, communication, fellowship, mentoring, and visibility exclude some of those who are already marginalized by society. Architects are able to avoid equal opportunity laws and affirmative action programs because of the small size of most architectural offices. Women and people of color feel isolated rather than welcomed. ‘Being ‘the first’ and ‘the only’ often
results in undue pressure to succeed or in self-consciousness, low self-esteem, and loneliness” (p. 134). Harassment is widely reported, and pay inequities are likely. As a result, many women leave the profession and people of color do not enter into it.

The specific social positions of both the makers and sponsors of architecture help determine form. Architecture, in turn, both makes and represents the world. Thus, the profession’s insularity helps maintain a world of inequity, as buildings support the social purposes they serve. Whether or not there can be a feminist-, race-, ethnicity-, or sexuality-based architecture, there can be a wider field of individual voices. Further, Anthony argues that “when women, persons of color, gays and lesbians, and persons with disabilities work side by side with white male architects, they are better able to respond to the complex environmental needs of diverse users” (p. 35). Through diversity, through the introduction of new narratives, the very act of architecture could help civil society develop.

Anthony places some responsibility for our current situation on the AIA. It took until 1991 for the AIA to revise its public policy on civil rights, and until 1992 to create a diversity task force. And, although efforts have been made with committees, newsletters, and conferences, the AIA has been slow to implement strategic plans, fund studies, or back up its policies. Over the last ten years, with a small budget and sample size, Anthony created her own survey and interview research. Designing for Diversity provides what the AIA has not: an investigation into existing conditions and a summary of goals and guidelines to remedy gender and racial inequities.

Although Anthony concludes that “women’s experiences with their first job tended to be more negative than those of men,” and “significant racial differences were demonstrated in the rates at which people passed the ARE” (p. 131), her analysis of first jobs, IDP, and registration exams could have been stronger. Although there are lengthy summaries of these “rites of passage,” Anthony fails to provide data to support her findings. As a result, the quotes she provides remain anecdotal: concluding that people’s expectations do not meet their experiences is not unique to the underrepresented nor to this profession. Anthony also undervalues those who pursue alternative careers outside traditional practice. Even though the mainstream remains stagnant, many have challenged its boundaries and borders. Lastly, I detected a geographic bias in some of her examples and was surprised that the place of residence for survey respondents is not listed.

Although Designing for Diversity is a sobering study, Anthony’s conclusions are hopeful. Her proposals for employers include rotating employees to encourage a range of experiences and leadership positions, and promoting diversity in office situations by establishing supportive work environments. For students, she stresses the importance of studying the history of affinity groups that developed to support and lobby for change, and using the Internet to establish a noticeable presence. For schools, she suggests restructuring design studios to combat gendered practices and incorporating diversity into the architectural curricula. She would like the profession as a whole and the media that covers it to provide greater visibility for underrepresented architects and improve interaction between mainstream and outside-the-mainstream architects.

The immediate goal for architects is simple: “Having people stop and sit to listen to what you can do, not how you look” (Asian-American female respondent, age thirty-six). Anthony believes that a new paradigm, one that values differences and manages diversity, will benefit our environments and help create a more humane and flexible society.

Ira Tattelman

The Room in Context: Design Beyond Boundaries
Katherine Benzel
McGraw-Hill, 1998
388 pages, 238 illustrations
$59.95 (cloth)

The inhabited room in any urban building is a small but important part of a city’s overall identity. The room is a vital aspect of the building, the building is a significant element of the street, the street is a meaningful component of the neighborhood, and the neighborhood is an essential part of the city. (p. 102)

If you design in the service of others and, in so doing, integrate your work with that of other design professionals, then Katherine Benzel’s The Room in Context: Design Beyond Boundaries is a resource to be read, digested, and read again. Benzel grounds her argument for the inescapable link between room, structure, landscape, street, park, and city in the activities of people’s daily lives. Her historical and cross-cultural analyses of the artifacts of daily life as a continuum of spatial experiences pushes design thinking from the too frequent focus on objects and their construction to “the fabric of social life” as it forms and informs people and the character of places.

Using mostly classical Italian examples (with some American, Australian, and historical Japanese sites) she asks us to “look beyond
[our] traditional [professional] boundaries and view space not only in terms of its contents and style but, more important, in terms of its common ground in the continuity between itself and its total surroundings” (p. 5). She then shows us the interdependence of the room’s relationship to the “cohesive integrity” of the building, the “substance and renewal” of the landscape, and the city in “its collective symbols, patterns, ideals and ideas of social living” (p. 5). The Room in Context is an excellent supplement to Edmund Bacon’s Design of Cities (1974). Both should be read, analytically discussed, and tested in interior design, architecture, and landscape architecture programs and professional offices.

I particularly enjoy Benzé’s efforts to dissolve spatial and professional boundaries. By illuminating the “perceptible and imperceptible ways” people as society are part of “an interconnected physical, social, and spatial organism,” she helps us realize the whole (city) in the parts (rooms) and the parts in the whole. “Since antiquity, the house has been thought of as a miniature city and the city as a large house” (p. 79). We are told that you cannot remove a room from a city without diminishing the goodness of the city. She then focuses on each of the interrelated and interconnected spatial aspects of the room in the context of the city, the landscape, the street, and the building. Through clear, poignant examples, Benzé gives us the larger contexts of each, discusses their respective, primary physical design features of ground, vertical, and overhead planes, and then explores the interplay of color selection, textures, light and lighting, and more. An added value for young designers is in the closing analysis of several noted designers’ methods and designs that bring the outdoors in and tie the indoors (including furniture) with the landscape.

So much of what she illuminates is ingrained and taken for granted. Through etymological studies of numerous words (home, city, context, integrate, harmony, and vestibule, to name a few), she heightens our awareness of the interrelationship among particular words and particular spaces and spatial qualities. She illuminates the similarities of patterns, details, and spatial organization in examples from the works of major design professionals. Synthesis and integration, and rhythm and pattern are the key concepts driving Benzé’s thinking of life as environment. How their interdependence enhances the whole of life is carried from the larger cultural artifacts of the city to the smallest details of rooms and their interior designs.

What makes The Room in Context and Design of Cities complementary is their agreement on the critical importance of how people’s movement is related to the success of a design. Whereas Bacon comes at this from the scale of the city and brings his thinking into the small spaces of everyday life, Benzé carries us from the personal experiences of rooms and hallways into streets and urban spaces and then back to the room. For example, in a series of analytical drawings, one of Benzé’s students walks us along a path through the garden at the Katsura Imperial Villa in Kyoto. Junko Miyata’s description and sketches treat us to a vivid sequence of landscape features that caused her to move in varied cadences and shift her head and eyes to focused and opened views, while sensually and psychologically realizing a sequence of planned experiences. This example alone gives students and practitioners a heightened awareness of how the organization of spaces and objects can be employed to give pedestrians direction while generating emotions and physiological experiences. In my mind, Katherine Benzé’s work is truly interdisciplinary.

I hope for a second, paperback edition because the hardcover price of $59.95 will deter the wide readership it deserves. In a second edition, I would hope to see two changes made. First, headers in the endnotes are needed to indicate the pages from which the notes are drawn. At present, correlating notes and text is cumbersome and difficult. Second, the aptness of the final case study, Richard Johnson’s Museum of Sydney, as “a space that reflects the theme of this book,” was lost on me and lacked the sensitive writing and inviting imagery dominant through the previous 360 pages. Yet, even as it stands, Katherine Benzé’s work succeeds in helping break down the walls evident between the design students in various areas of study prior to joining my fourth-year interdisciplinary studio. The Room in Context stimulated thoughtful discussions and innovative designs among my students. She has helped us realize ways to improve our work by recognizing its greater social, physical, and historical contexts.

Bob Scarfo
Washington State University