Desiring Practices
Architecture, Gender and the Interdisciplinary

Edited by
Katerina Rüedi
Sarah Wigglesworth
Duncan McCorquodale

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Karen Burns

Architecture/ Discipline/ Bondage
That is a very abstract remark, so I will come clean and tell you what I mean to do before upending the contents of my net. I want to consider the terms ‘architecture’ and ‘building’ as identity categories, as terms that identity and signify what architecture is, and what it is not, and to argue that attempts to distinguish between the two terms are relevant to a feminist inquiry, and to an understanding of architecture’s disciplinary identity, and thus its relation to other disciplines. A relation, I understand, that is one of the strands of connection for this symposium and one of its terms of scrutiny. So, the terms architecture/building, discipline/interdisciplinary are the threads that weave through this paper and bind it together.

There are knowledges of built space other than those that circulate within my discipline (architecture). This symposium overtly recognises other knowledges about built space and intimates that architecture is interested in this work. However, I believe that architecture cannot incorporate this material without considering the challenges posed by this "different knowledge, an other competence impinging on", architecture’s "neatly delimited space".

Part of the possibility of interdisciplinary study is perversely, the project of paying careful attention to the specificity of knowledges, to its neatly delimited spaces, and to the histories of the formation of particular disciplines. It is a project that asks questions of a discipline’s protocols: what values organise a discipline, give it coherence, form its methodologies and constitute its range of objects? Given this definition my interests in other knowledge and architecture are two-fold. First, how might we (architecture professionals) theorise rather than celebrate or take as inevitable, the meeting of architecture and other particular knowledges? Secondly, what has been the place of other knowledges about built space within architecture? The following part of the paper is addressed to my curiosity about other knowledge of built space as a figure of attentiy in architecture.

Other knowledges of built space are not just happy accidents of the mid-1980s. It is possible to argue that other knowledge of built space has been around for some time (whether one cites Michel Foucault’s study of the productive relations of space and circulations of power, or Michel de Certeau’s attempt to theorise, and in so doing, also produce a range of spatial knowledge as everyday practice). However, my interest is in what architecture has already named, marked and defined as its understanding of other knowledge about built space. I will argue that for some time, it has represented this other knowledge to itself as building, perhaps, at least, since the professionalisation of the building trades in the nineteenth century.

My questions today are about the term ‘architecture’. I think it is fruitful to ask questions of that term as well as pursuing questions about the terms ‘man’ or ‘woman’ in relation to architecture, or alternatively, tracing the always/already inscribed incisions of sexual difference as architecture. In asking questions of the term architecture, and its definitional borders, this paper connects (bonds within) one strand of contemporary feminism outside the architectural disciplinary enclosure. It re-deploys some key terms under investigation: feminism's interest in identity categories and the precise calibrations of difference.
it is a risk to talk about the familiar building/architecture binary. The risk is that
you (and even I) will be bored. However it is worth trying to think again about
the figure of the familiar in our discipline. Building as a category is used to
designate and describe the everyday, familiar built environment. In Australia,
this represents some ninety-odd percent of built space.

The building/architecture categories might be thought of as a simple
classification scheme; is a built space designed by an architect or someone
else, and thus as a guide to asking whether that built space is a building or
architecture? Or is it a scheme for designating the value of built objects; are they
merely functional, aesthetic or more than that? (Of course to pose the terms in
this way is to keep slicing away at the same old piece of driftwood...). However,
I want to think about the categories in different ways, as identity categories.
Architecture, like building, is an identity category, a category that signifies and
identifies what architecture is, what it may be, and what it is not. In some ways it
is a story about sameness (architecture) and difference (building).

These identity categories are produced within and by the institutions
of architecture. They do not merely classify built 'objects', but work to define the
range of practices, values and terrain of inquiry available to someone called an
architect. Learning the divisions is part of an institutionalised process of identity
formation. Architects are made, not born.

Samuel Weber has written of institutionalisation as the attempted systematic
closure of meaning. To rethink the terms of the architecture/building binary is to
think about the designated range of meanings given to those terms and the
function of certain university and cultural institutions to act as the sole or privileg-
ed guardians and transmitters of those meanings. Until the proliferation of other
knowledges of built space in the university, my discipline has constituted itself as
a privileged guardian (perhaps the sole guardian) of knowledge about built space.

I would like to pause and take a brief look at one of those cultural institutions,
the history of architecture text, at home most often in undergraduate reading
lists. To investigate the building/architecture binary, is a project ridiculously large
for a paper of this size. I have begun the reading list, but it could go on for ever.
I am not going to present a Gargantuian feast, instead I will begin where I started
this foolhardy study, attending to some of the differences between architecture
and building as they have been produced in a series of canonical architectural
history texts published in the Anglo-American world in the last thirty years (texts
by Nikolaus Pevsner, Spiro Kostof, Bernard Rudofsky and Patrick Nuttgens). So
there is a certain level of generalisation in my haste to explicate the argument
and make a point.

There is a lot to say about these terms architecture/building, which are, I think,
the basis of my discipline's sense of what its projects are. But only a few recent
writers (Mark Wigley, Miriam Gusevich and Diane Agrest) have turned their
attention to this area. I think more people should be talking about this. Putting
aside the many things one might want to say, I will focus instead, on the one
thing that really struck me as I read Pevsner, Kostof and their brothers.

One way of describing architectural history might be that it is a history of proper
names. It collects and inscribes the names of persons identified as the architect.
The definition of architecture in these texts by Pevsner et al is inextricably linked
to the singular figure of the architect. In this way, architecture is a signed surface
not just a built space. Signed built spaces in this order are attached to other
entities; the landscape, the community, anonymous builders, nature.
Architecture can be traced to singular, often male identities. Architecture has
names (and presumably faces) whilst building is faceless.

The signing of a building transforms it into an individual object constituting its
value. The signature is construed as proof of a singular identity. The historian's
attachment to a self "located" behind a building seems to involve a greater
investment than securing a recognisable name in order to value a building as a
unique, and thus highly valuable, commodity within an aesthetic economy.
A whole series of other values is conjured up by the spectre of the individual
signature. For example, when Spiro Kostof argues for the building/architecture
distinction he invokes masculinist biology. Architecture he tells me, "is
conceived". It is not an unplanned pregnancy or somehow unproductive sex, it
is willed and directed.

There are two further things to note about the attribution of individualised
identity to architecture, the positive term of the binary. The binary works to
position architects as producers not users of the built environment, since
individuality is equated with a particular kind of production recognised as 'The
Production'. It does not consider other kinds of production (use such as my own
writing). Secondly, in the end, building is not defined as another mode of spatial
knowledge, and knowledge-making. Building is the naive other that does not
know what it means or does. Rather, architecture deems building incapable of
theorising its own activity.

I apologise for the crude caricature of a binary that has its subtleties and
exceptions. I will redress this cartoon towards the end of the paper. But I believe
that most of our activities as architectural professionals are directed
towards what is recognisably marked as architecture (and only a small
percentage of that work is published, registered in discourse). Building may be
the ‘inert’ material that architecture takes on to reform, but I think it does this largely as an *a priori*, not as a carefully studied field. The point of all this, for me, is to ask what happens when this map of architecture’s site of inquiry meets a ‘discipline’ (relentlessly interdisciplinary though it is), like cultural studies?

Much of the theoretical work on built space and sexual difference that interests me has been produced by feminists working in the disciplines of film and cultural studies. Built space in many of these studies is unrecognisable as ‘architecture’ in the given terms of my discipline; display homes, suburban homes, suburbia, shopping centres, the signification of domestic space in television soaps, the relation between film narrative, sexualities and space, the rewriting of the genre, conventions of tower, motel, shopping centre, women’s work and leisure practices in the work of Meaghan Morris. And it goes on,¹⁰¹ and other architectural professionals I have met, have been interested in using this work. But in a cautionary mode I wonder, can architecture merely digest and absorb what it has hitherto considered largely unpalatable (building), or will it examine before swallowing?

To briefly examine the cultural studies morse: for me, there are at least three things about these writings, if one works in architecture, that should make you think otherwise about one’s disciplinary assumptions. First, these are built spaces regarded as worthy of serious theorisation, of the kind of temporal scholarly activity usually only devoted to architecture in our discipline. Secondly, this range of spaces is not primarily identified as architecture or building; that is, by the origin of the producer (although architects as producers can come in for some stick).² Space is often defined by genre and a genre’s probable spatial uses, conventions, practices and possibilities, or by the set of questions and connections concerning the writer. Thirdly, these spaces may or may not have been designed by architects. It is not an issue that raises much of a flicker of interest in the eyes of many a critic. Of course the symbolic status sometimes accrued to that position ‘Architect’ is another matter.¹² This makes perfect sense in the work I am interested in on ‘women and built space’, because feminism as a political project is less interested in built space as an emanation from a sole author, than in considering built space as productive of political events. Writers seek other frameworks for explanation.

I am not saying that this therefore makes architecture an irrelevant practice, I will come to that shortly. Whatever the theorised built space in these works I have admired, whether shopping centres or the figuration of space in films, television soaps, gothic and romance novels; whatever, in these writings, built space is inseparable from its use and uses (including, I should add, its use in architectural discourse). This is a radical shift of frame for an architectural audience whose concern has largely been with narratives of explanation which ‘revive’ the architect’s conception of the building.

However, a number of the writings I have cited above, work with issues of audience and spectatorship, sometimes merely reinvesting Authorial Origin as explanation.¹³ Whatever hesitations and qualifications (and others) might have about this work on ‘Ordinary Women’, audience and spectatorship, this knowledge-making has done at least two things.¹⁴ First, built space as architecture has had its identity as an isolated discipline collapse. Feminism has framed built space as a site of women’s practices in order to make surprising connections which unsettle established orthodoxies. For example, in Lynne Siegel’s study of the 1950s North American suburban home, disparate material (house lay-out, housework, television viewing practices, the reformation of visual entertainment, the feminisation of certain TV programmes) is used to resignify Woman/Home. Public spaces, conventionally construed as the binary opposite of Woman/Home are shown to be inside the home (in the space of the viewing screen) and the home is understood as a signer that works in the space of television programmes to code the possibilities of Home/Public Sphere. Both ‘Home’ and ‘Public Sphere’ have laid out spaces inside themselves where they might imagine their outside.

Secondly, the work of these writers and of other artists and film makers not mentioned here, has created different constituencies for discussions of built space, different to the one (of architectural professionals) my discipline has always imagined existed.¹⁵ These constituencies are scattered across a number of sites: in the academy, in private reading groups, non-university courses, discus-sion, art galleries, arts bureaucratic reports and government reports generally.

These constituencies and their sites provide possible places for thinking other practices of architecture. The convenors of this conference have consistently challenged all the presenters to suggest new (desiring) practices and I am going to offer four that could emerge from these new constellations; first, fanazines in which people generally write about built space, secondly, speculative projects about built space in public spaces, funded by arts bodies, thirdly, an alliance of people inside and outside the architectural profession which can lobby governments for the reform of discriminatory practices in the profession and promote other discussions of what the profession might do, what its competency is and why it matters.
My final suggestion about architectural practice involves telling you a few stories about a particular Australian architect, Peter Myers, who practises consulting, teaching and writing, amongst other things. His work offers me a way of marking another kind of architectural practice in my discourse. It is also an allegory about not having to reinvent the wheel. Thinking about what architecture might do, what very modest claims it might make, could involve taking a look at what is already in our own backyard, but has not been decreed as 'The Way To Go'.

I want to discuss briefly one of Myers' essays. One of the things that draws me back to his work is the way in which his writing is made within, and remakes those categories, building, architecture, identity, that keep detonating at regular intervals in this essay.

The piece is titled ‘Housing’ Aborigines—The Case of Wilcannia, 1974, rewritten and published in 1988.22 It was originally written in 1974 at the request of the chairperson of a Senate Committee on the Environmental Conditions of Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. It begins unconventionally for a government report, as a first-person prose piece about watching a racist situation unfold in a roadhouse at the site, in outback Wilcannia, the classic opening to a redneck movie: one of the many such incidents Myers witnessed in the course of his research. Myers, the undercover researcher, is left with a split-second decision, should he step in to cut the racism and risk being beaten up, or having his cover blown? In the end he does nothing.

It is important he begins the essay this way. He is not only providing a slice of life realism to fill in what an official report genre does not allow to be included, he is placing himself and his professional identity within the process and landscape of his research. At Wilcannia, he observes, "The role of 'consultant' is always suspect".23

Myers' essay offers me some ways of rewriting the professional architect's given terms of identity. First, Peter Myers The Architect appears in the landscape he is researching. His story about having to make a choice as to whether to intervene at the roadhouse might be read allegorically, as a description of the architect's professional persona. He does not serve up the familiar tale of the stoic, architectural hero riding in from outside to fix things up and then enigmatically slipping out of town. Nor does he claim that he, the architect, is only an instrument of the bureaucracy that commissioned him. He is offered choices, to intervene or not (or to write about it later), but these choices exist within conditions that are not of his own making. Individuality as willful authority, those key definitional terms for architecture are woven back within those definitional terms given to building; the Community, randomness, conditions not of one's own making.

Secondly, Myers' essay can be read as a rewriting of those apparently separate categories architecture/building. In analysing the built spaces produced by the Bakaunji community at Wilcannia, Myers discovers that the template of his own architectural values does not fit over his research material. He discovers that maintenance is of a symbolic rather than functional nature, entangled as it is within white Australian notions of order, tidiness and propriety that do not register in the order of this community. He discovers that relationships between rooms and their apparent functions (kitchens as the place for cooking for example), are culturally particular and not universally given. He discovers here, in this community, that privacy can exist without material structural supports, without the acoustics and visual separation that white Australia takes for granted as a defining condition. So here what architecture has hitherto designated as 'building' teaches architecture new ways of theorising about built space and reflecting on architecture's values, rather than offering raw material for appropriation.

This shrewd socio-spatial analysis (a theorisation of knowledge) is part of his proposition for change. Part of the 'problem' at Wilcannia is the continued imposition of a highly culturally particular (white Anglo) form of housing on another culture without consideration of the lack of fit. In Myers' recommendations, reassessing the 'spatial' is entangled with other issues: the cultural values of built space, poverty as illegal dispossession from one's land, and the community's right to economic self-determination.

Thirdly, Myers' own architectural knowledge and values are reformed through his reflection on another set of values and frameworks, even as he presents these in translation, through a white Australian professional's set of understandings. Myers not only embodies a set of cultural values as the architect, he works within and is worked on by these values. His professional identity in the Wilcannia landscape is inescapable, he does not merely let it merge with the scenery.

Lastly, Myers is the figure of difference in the black Australian landscape of the Bakaunji community. His identity as a professional white Australian is as important as, perhaps more important than, but inextricably part of, the conjunction of his identities as an architect and a man. Here he is the outsider, architecture is the outsider discourse. The identity categories of architecture/sexual difference are woven within other junctures of difference. Sometimes, in a given built space, these bonds may be the foremost pattern of identification, more significant than the two on offer at this symposium (discipline and sex.) It is a reminder that sexual difference is the beginning, not the end, of the possibilities for reformulating architecture's identity, and that knowledge of identity is "always situated not universal".24
I have cited and reread Peter Myers’ Wilcannia research, because I believe that his work is part of the project of making a difference in one community in outback New South Wales. It may only happen in the long term, and not in the short term, as built space. In this way he continues struggling to make a difference. Part of this difference is formed by remaking his work in this discourse, so that we know that this is the kind of useful work architects can do, and have already done. Myers, the architect, is aware that architects like everybody else, are positioned in conditions of built space which are not of their own making, and that this is the beginning not the end of the problem. How do you make (transform) history in this condition?

In many ways of course, I have kept the architecture/building distinction intact, even as I have suggested that the distinction may not be useful depending on the type of questions asked of the built spaces analysed. However, the architecture/building divisions might be displaced again (not erased) by thinking about them as built space, whose producers do not hold an Orignary function, but do hold different, sometimes powerful positions that inscribe, and (sometimes) circumscribe, their speaking positions, and the social power that determines how and where and by whom, those speaking will be heard. Myers is attentive to this difference of speaking position as the Government Commissioned Architect.

Lawrence Grossberg, the North American-based cultural studies writer and fan, in pondering the critical authority of cultural studies theorists argues that this authority cannot be based on privileged distinctions of taste and disaste. He wisely observes, “the problem is not to deconstruct authority, but to re-articulate new forms of authority which allow us to speak as critical fans”.29 One way of doing this is to think again about this quotation in relation to the producer (architect/user (community) distinction. Architects are critical users of built space. Like a number of others they are involved in articulating new possibilities, and building them. This demands theorisation of existing practices, specificity of the problems involved, an awareness of how professional identities are constituted, and a commitment not to abandon the possibilities of the everyday built environment, as a place for situating a political practice.

The next time you (if you are an architect) are at the video store, the movies, the shopping centre, sauntering along a city street, you may be snapped by another person. You may see someone taking notes. You may meet another’s glance. This someone may well be another critical user of the built environment, a cultural studies academic, a koori writer, an artist or houseworker. In their glance the other identities which inform you, may well come to the fore (shopper, walker, dress, class, sexuality, race, ethnicity). You are all of these as well as being an architect, and this may be the beginning of a way out.

The way out, reminds me again of Lot’s Wife. Since I mentioned her at the beginning, I have had to do a bit of biblical research (Genesis: 19) in between, and I wanted to end with her since her biblical position is pretty dismal. She was the woman, you may remember, who could not resist looking back, poking her nose into things she had been told to leave well alone (two cities on the plain) and so was turned into a pillar of salt, radically changing her identity (from woman and spouse into memorial mound). This is a good starting point for any feminist investigation of the western, Christian urban (homophobic) imaginary. Lot’s Wife did not die however, she lives on as the university student newspaper at Monash, in Melbourne, suggesting how one kind of dead-end identity might be rewritten under different conditions, and that salt can be used to savour new food for thought, not just to remind one of old wounds.

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Notes

1 This, of course, does not rule out the political necessity of carrying out these projects, but with ever more careful attention to what is at stake in such work, and with an awareness that knowledge, as Jenna Mead observes, "is situated, not universal". It involves ever more precise articulations of difference, as well as a recognition of the fundamental instability of the category "woman", whilst considering how "essentialism" has informed feminism historically, since its political programme is based on an identity politics. It is the challenges to feminism's ability to articulate difference as women otherwise. In listing them this way I am not suggesting that all of these questions are resolvable in one unitary position, but they are important questions for feminism today. See ChandraMohanty's critique of western feminism "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse" in Mohanty, C. et al. (eds.), Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 51-80; Kirby, V., "Corporate Habits: Addressing Essentialism Differently", Hypatia 6, 3 Fall 1991, pp. 4-74; Jagose, A., Lesbian Utopics, New York and London: Routledge, 1991, pp. 15-17; Mead, J., "Where is the West?", Meanjin 4, 1993, p. 728.


4 Over the last eight or nine years these spatial knowledges have boomed in the discipline of geography, cultural studies, film theory, art history, english and philosophy.


8 Weber, S. (ed.), Demarcating the Disciplines, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966, p. x. Weber makes this remark in passing, as he explores the links between Derrida's so-called 'earlier' work, up to Dissemination and after that text.


11 Mark Wigley, for example, has examined the ways in which the split is staged by classical metaphysics with its division of nature/art, speech/writing, unadorned/ornamented. Wigley, M., The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1993, pp. 130-133. Miriam Gusevich has argued that the binary terms are deployed as part of architecture's canon formation, institutionalising the difference between the so-called common structures and monuments. Gusevich, M., "The Architecture of Criticism: A Question of Autonomy" in Kain, A. (ed.), Drawing: Building: Text, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991, pp. 8-9. Diane Agrest, in an essay originally published in the mid-1970s, refigured the terms as design/non-design. She argued that these categories were used to instigate a non-sustainable division between one cultural system and others. Agrest, D., "Design versus Non-Design" in Architecture from Without: Theoretical Framings for a Critical Practice, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1991, pp. 31-65. Thanks to Stephen Cairns for drawing my attention to this essay. My own interest is slightly different. It circles around a series of other values attributed to the terms, and the status of building as a figure of difference.

12 Here I am transforming Eric Michaels' observations on the role of the signature in art. See Michaels, E., "Bad Aboriginal Art" in Bad Aboriginal Art Tradition, Media and Technological Horizons, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p. 43: "The painting is a signed object as much as it is a painted surface".

13 Rudofsky, p. v.

14 For example, Rudofsky rescued building from its excoriated state, but did not displace the binary's terms. Patrick Nuttgens also included a wide variety of buildings in his history.


A notable exception to this would be Frederic Jameson’s (infamous essay “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” in Kaplan, E. A. (ed.), Postmodernism and its Discontents, London and New York: Verso, 1988, pp. 13-29. Not that Jameson’s essay touches on sexual difference, but it is a rare example concerned with the big names of architecture.

For example, in Rosalyn Deutsche’s work on the politics of redevelopment at Battery Park, it is quite clear that ‘urban professionals’ (architects among them?) are heavily invested in defining the symbolic stories that situate a site/building’s place, and the particular sections of the community to whom those meanings and narratives are deemed to belong and legitimise. See Deutsche, R., "Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City", October, 47, 1988, p. 33.

My paraphrase of a line from Meaghan Morris concerned with texts, not built space, the origin of which has become lost in travels around my room.


Artists like Judith Barry, Jenny Holzer and Renée Green.


Mead, "West", p. 728.

Grossberg, "It’s", p. 69.