

Chapter 39

Design and the Creation of Shelter for Women: An Overview

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As the considerable body of work produced in theoretical writings on women's issues has shown since the nineteenth century, various cultural, political, and economic aspects of contemporary societies reflect assumptions that have often failed to consider the nature of women's needs. Architectural theory and design, produced primarily by male theorists and practitioners, have traditionally accepted such assumptions and reproduced them especially in the morphology, typology, and spatial arrangement of domestic architecture. However, as the papers on the theme *Design and the Creation of Shelter for Women* indicate, due to recent social developments and a new theoretical orientation of scholars from various fields (architecture, urban planning, anthropology, sociology, etc.), women's issues are beginning to appear in architectural research programs.

The influence of theories focusing on women's issues on both urban and housing design is not new. Since the nineteenth century, various branches of feminist discourse have approached the question of women's position and role in society from different points of view. "Socialist feminists," for instance, "saw the dominance of men over women and class politics as acting together in the oppression of women, whereas radical feminists argued that male dominance formed the motor force behind women's subordination from which all men, of whatever class, benefited."¹ Women from minority groups, on the other hand, have advanced such issues as cultural conventions and religious requirements² as the primary sources in which the oppression of women originate. This approach could be viewed as introducing a distinction between the problems that constitute the main concerns of women in the First and the Third Worlds. Sexuality has been another issue which has determined yet a different approach to the women's movement. Some lesbian women "see a society which values heterosexual relations to the exclusion of all others as being intensely problematic ..." while others "see themselves as placed more firmly within a socialist tradition which places an emphasis on class."³

The above approaches to women's issues, to which many more can be added, constitute theoretical positions that seek not only to explicate the problems of women in contemporary societies but also to question conventional cultural practices and norms, the effects of modern economy and politics and even the traditional arrangement of family life. They could, therefore, be viewed as having an at least implicit effect on the physical, architectural form of housing. However, there have also

been other feminist movements, based on the technological advancements and economic developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which succeeded in revolutionizing domestic environments. Such is, for instance, the case of the material feminists. As described by Hayden, the material feminists "demanded economic remuneration for women's unpaid household labor. They proposed a complete transformation of the spatial design and material culture of American homes, neighborhoods, and cities. While other feminists campaigned for political and social change with philosophical and moral arguments, the material feminists concentrated on economic and spatial issues as the basis of material life."⁴

As a general comment, then, it could be said that much of feminist discourse has focused on theoretical and pragmatic proposals that could transform gender assumptions, social conditions, cultural norms, and stereotypical images of women, and could subsequently change the form of urban spaces and houses to serve the particular needs of specific groups of women. The papers on the theme *Design and the Creation of Shelter for Women*, however, are characterized by a different orientation: rather than proposing new approaches to architectural design as a means to satisfy women's material/pragmatic needs, they argue for an architecture that reflects the special qualities of women's inner world and consequently represents their true being. As Professor Donna Salzer argued, in her summary of the design theme, the papers of this panel "ask that we look at alternative ways of inhabiting, ... that we consider how women occupy space differently than the much generalized and standardized western dwellings might imply."⁵

The first two papers on the Design theme focus on case studies from the developing countries and examine "how women ... occupy housing—the way in which forms are created specifically in response to women's way of using and inhabiting spaces."⁶ Reporting on an organically grown settlement (slum) in Bangalore, India, Neema Bhatt in her paper "The Socio-Economic Impact of Open Spaces on Women in a Spontaneous Settlement" examines the role of open and semi-closed spaces attached to the main housing unit and their beneficial effect on the psychological and economic well-being of women.⁷ In another paper entitled "Segregation of Women in Islamic Societies and Its Effects on Rural Housing Design: Bangladesh," Tasneem Chowdhury deals with the elaborate system of spatial separation that has developed in a rural community as a reflection of the

cultural and religious (Islamic) requirements of gender segregation. Those requirements, Chowdhury argues, have produced a distinct, secondary network of communication for the exclusive use of women, in addition to a variety of typological and morphological characteristics in the design of housing. Along with the strict principles of women's segregation, however, economic considerations constitute a significant issue: while the poverty that the local population faces has become a source for creative solutions, it also constitutes a considerable restriction often preventing women from following the rules determined by their religion and culture.

The first group of papers clearly notes the need for future research to focus on the analysis of the specific socio-economic and cultural contexts in the developing countries and to examine their implications on the design of housing and its main consumers: the female population. Yet a second group of papers primarily dealing with recent social developments introduces actual and urgent problems that have begun to emerge in the United States and require immediate solutions. The increasing percentages of single women heading households,⁸ and the issue of homelessness of women often resulting from purely economic reasons but also from domestic violence, alcohol, and drug abuse, are some of the problems that describe an actual social crisis for which theoretical inquiry and architectural explorations should provide answers.

As Joan Forrester Sprague notes in her paper "Women and Shelter-Related Services and Infrastructure," a variety of housing types has already begun to develop in response to the above needs. Those types which Sprague calls "lifeboat" housing can be categorized as emergency, transitional, and permanent housing and have taken various architectural forms. In her description of a wide variety of such institutional shelters throughout the United States, Sprague notes that an essentially communitarian aspect characterizes everyday life in lifeboat housing. Beyond the conventional four zones of use (personal, household, community, neighborhood), she argues, lifeboats incorporate two additional ones: "one between household and community and another between community and neighborhood."⁹

Institutional housing that is often created by particular communities constitutes a solution that can considerably assist women in crisis and even, as Sprague mentions, transform and save their lives.¹⁰ Yet the architectural expression and the aesthetic value of such shelter, resulting from unimaginative designs and the strict

adherence to existing building codes and standards remain unresolved problems. This is the issue on which the three final presentations on the Design theme focus.

In her presentation "Redefining Standards: Toward a Positive Ambivalence," Kim Tanzer dealt with a project for a shelter for battered women. Through a comparative analysis of the project as conceived and implemented, she discusses two types of changes that the initial design underwent during the stage of its execution: (1) the transformation of unconventional heights to standardized ones, and (2) the removal of its protective layers (built in shelves and cabinets, tongue and groove interior siding, porches, built in benches¹¹). While questioning the validity of existing architectural norms and standards for the design of transitional housing for women in her analysis, Tanzer also argues "for an architecture which could accommodate intimacy, protection, security, and home-like qualities."¹²

Another paper dealing with the issue of aesthetics and architectural expression in transitional housing is that of Mary Follenweider. In "Language, Sacred and Transitional Housing," approaching her topic from a theoretical point of view, Follenweider argues for a feminist aesthetic that should be tactile, physical, erotic, spiritual, mediative, mystical. A new architectural language expressive of such qualities and endowed with the elements of the sacred, she argues, is conceivable and could become particularly important for the design of transitional housing because "it [could] provide the means by which new kinds of lives may facilitate new kinds of structures as a real force of change ... [and could] also connect individuals to the greater universal myth of human existence."¹³

The final paper of the Design theme, "Shelter: a Place of the Telling, A Chimerical Cookbook," by Tamy Silverman and Chris Taylor, seeks to extend and generalize the discourse on housing for women by focusing on the question of shelter as such. The objective of transforming conventional conceptions of shelter by including heterogeneous, subjective, unthematized views and experiences constitutes a central theme in this work. "Through this paper" Taylor and Silverman write, "we hope to define shelter in terms which extend beyond the limits of accommodation and begin to deal with issues of place involving the individual and the personal within society."¹⁴ The cookbook as a conventional form able to contain dissimilar elements and chimera as the female myth being able to accommodate and transform the real and the phantastic become the metaphors through which

women are brought into the center of a reconsidered notion of shelter.

A common objective that seems to characterize at least the second group of papers is the need for the architecture of transitional and single-female-parent family housing to be expressive of such homelike qualities as intimacy, protection, security, safety. These qualities that seem to serve the special needs of women could also be related to the notion of dwelling as it is discussed by Martin Heidegger. "The fundamental character of dwelling," Heidegger argues, "is ... [the] sparing and preserving."¹⁵ "Real sparing," he continues, "is something *positive* and takes place when we leave something beforehand in its own nature, when we return it specifically to its being, when we 'free' it in the real sense of the word into a preserve of space."¹⁶

Building for oppressed women, then, should produce spaces that allow them to dwell and subsequently provide the preconditions that will lead to the emergence of their true being. This abstract requirement, however, should not be viewed as limiting the architectural project. The sociologist Georg Simmel has noted that "insofar as the woman lies beyond both of these tendencies—which are actually eccentric, that of sensual desire and transcendent form—she might even be described as the authentic 'human being', as the being which is situated in the human in the most unqualified sense."¹⁷ The creation of an architecture expressive of such qualities as safety, protection, stability, and homeliness that the authors in this panel advocate, not only will contribute to accomplishing a significant social mission, but will also provide the means by which the true nature of women's being and, through it, the true nature of the being of human kind in general can emerge.

Notes

¹ Marion Roberts, *Living in a Man-Made World, Gender Assumptions in Modern Housing Design*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 2

² See M. Roberts, *Living*, p. 2

³ M. Roberts, *Living*, p. 3

⁴ Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982, p. 1

⁵ Donna Salzer, Theme Summaries and Future Directions, International Conference: *Shelter, Women and Development, First and Third World Perspectives*, The College of Architecture and Urban Planning, The University of Michigan, May 9, 1992.

⁶ D. Salzer, Theme Summaries and Future Directions.

⁷ Bhatt also notes that in a few cases the income generating activities that open spaces allowed contributed to the physical degradation of women.

⁸ As J. Sprague notes "conservative census figures show that roughly a quarter of all households with children in the United States are headed by women. Joan Forrester Sprague, *More than Housing, Lifeboats for Women and Children*, Boston: Butterworth Architecture, 1991. 7

⁹ Joan Forrester Sprague, "Women and Shelter-Related Services and Infrastructures," abstract.

¹⁰ J. F. Sprague, "Women ...," abstract.

¹¹ Kim Tanzer, "Redefining Standards: Toward a Positive Ambivalence," presentation, May 7, 1992, International Conference: Shelter Women and Development: First and Third World Perspectives.

¹² D. Salzer, Theme Summaries and Future Directions, presentation, May 9, 1992, International Conference: Shelter Women and Development: First and Third World Perspectives.

¹³ Mary Follenweider, "Language, Sacred and Transitional Housing," abstract.

¹⁴ Chris Taylor, Tamy Silverman, "Shelter: A Place of the Telling, A Chimerical Cookbook," 2

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking" in *Poetry Language Thought*, New York: Harper and Row, 1971, 149.

¹⁶ M. Heidegger. "Building ...," 149.

¹⁷ Georg Simmel, *Georg Simmel on Women, Sexuality and Love*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, 111-2.