

Chapter 43

Language, Sacred Places, and Transitional Housing

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Concepts of sacred place are rooted deep within the cultural myths of a society. The revisioning of myth and of archetypal patterning done by women writers, grounded in "her" experience of the sacred, provides a new language for the creation of women's sacred places. The creation of a physical sacred space to inhabit can not only empower women through its design, but also transform architectural language to a language which speaks with a truly human voice. By incorporating elements of women's sacred place with the physical needs of transitional housing, the process may not only transform the residents, but also ultimately transform the language of the built environment. In this paper it is the context of white, middle class women in the United States, which is primarily considered.

Language—A System for Change

Language is a sign system which attempts to assimilate how a culture understands itself in relationship to the universal mystery of life. To explore this relationship, language provides the vehicle by which the culture acquires meaning through defining reality into a usable medium. By interpreting and organizing the world which individuals experience through their senses, words not only become symbolic expressions of thoughts and ideas, but also provide an order for formulating these thoughts and ideas. Thus words image the world, and this imagery provides structure to everyday existence. Since language is a human convention, it is influenced by cultural values, which filter the extent of the reality which can be ordered and the extent to which language can express this reality (Miller, 1976, 137). When this expression is inadequate language changes or new languages emerge.

Is this the origin of a "women's" language? Possibly, although to separate a distinct sign system is not easy; it requires that the "word" be judged in its real world context, and this revolves around a complex combination of judgments (Lakoff, 1975, 59). Nothing can ever be entirely isolated from its environment, and to operate in a vacuum is self-deception. However, because of entrapping social norms, gender roles which challenge women's authenticity and tension between "her" power and "her" powerlessness, women withdraw from hostile environments, seeking personal modes of self-exploration (Pratt, 1981, 67). Virginia Woolf was thinking of books whose writers withdrew from the patriarchal culture into self space to generate new modes of being, new language, books which were female in their vision,

in their narrative structure, and in their language (Fryer, 1986, 44).

Ostriker in her book, *Stealing the Language* (1986, 211), states that "it is a vigorous and varied invasion of the sanctuaries of the existing language where women write strongly as women." It is her belief that women writing "subvert and transform" life and literature by revisionist use of gender imagery. Adrienne Rich defines revision as: "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of extending an old text from a new critical direction" (Fryer, 1986, 235–236). This new experience through revision gives old words new meanings. The emerging of a women's language through revisioning allows for the opportunity of change and transformation of social and cultural structures.

Archetypal Patterning

All language originates from basic archetypal concepts of the sacred. Archetypal imagery derives from the reoccurrences of patterning in life experiences. This repetitiveness transcends everyday existence, but is intimately woven into the fabric of the culture. Jung saw these images as being derived from the unconscious. Archetypal images mark a visible transition from the unconscious through the consciousness of the human condition. For women there exists a commodity of experience which images itself through repeated patterning woven throughout stories, rituals, images, and symbols (Pratt, 1981, 3).

Helen Campbell wrote: "Cleaning can never pass from women's hands ... for to keep the world clean, this is the one great task for women" (Torre, 1977, 18). Homekeeping is an archetypal pattern going back even to paleolithic times when women have been credited with inventing containers. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as women increasingly went outside the home, causing a then-perceived social imbalance, the model home became the rigid structure imposed as a means of establishing and maintaining order and control (Fryer, 1986, 28). Mary Pattison defends this structure with the statement, "Better homes will give a better government, and better politics better homes" (Torre, 1977, 18). This patterning continued into the 1960's with Martha-Ann Kirk's song, "Washer Woman God":

Washer woman God, we know you in the water,
Washer woman God, splashing, laughing free,
If you didn't clean the mess where would we be,
Washer woman God,

But by the 1980's the archetypal patterning of keeping house and cleaning seemingly has lost some of its sacredness.

We had simply ceased to consider the room a parlor. Who would think of dusting or sweeping the cobwebs down in a room used for the storage of cans and newspapers, things utterly without value ... (Marilynne Robinson, 1980, 180).

Cleaning and housekeeping are still women's domain, but through revisioning it is being desanctified. Women need to discover patternings that are common among themselves and/or to create new images and stories which could lead to change in the language system, (Lauter, 1984, 208). Through a change in the language it is possible to affect the language system of architecture and the built form.

Myths

Myths change, are rejected, or new myths are created, when the existing ones can no longer adequately express the experience of the individual. They are the way that the culture attempts to understand itself in relationship to the universal whole. This understanding results in a better knowledge of self. Although culture cannot be totally assessed through direct perception or recognition, it does become an integral part of how individual lives are structured (Lauter, 1984, 209, 1–2). Myth reaches into preconscious experience and into symbolic order, emerging in that which is expressed through language, ritual, and symbols (Ecker, 1986, 19–20).

Myth forms a common ground of women's experience, strains of resonating inner journeys. Women's exploration of myths is a necessary part of remembering, because, by claiming the words, "her" reality is affirmed. The chief vocation then is to become conscious of the acts of myth making that do occur, and to establish a viable relationship with those myths relevant to every woman's experience. This ongoing process collectively reclaims and remembers both new and ancient intuitions, rituals, symbols, and patternings (Lauter, 1984, 213, 4). The connection among women is acknowledged by the recognition that the faces in mythology are really our own.

Whenever a poet employs a figure or a story previously accepted and defined by culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist; that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially

satisfying the thirst of the individual poet, but ultimately making cultural change possible (Ostriker, 1986, 212–213).

This is myth-making. The revisioning used by women writers in myth-making provides symbolic meaning and importance beyond itself, accessing the realm of the subconscious where memories and dreams are engendered, where the interior reality is an intuitive mapping of the true self (Pratt, 1981, 178).

The “home” myth can represent a trap, a tomb. Much has been written about this myth’s seemingly finer qualities, but still the entrapment imagery remains sharp and strong. Marilyn French calls it the fantasy it is and writes:

Jack, Jack pumpkin eater
Had a wife and couldn’t keep her.
Put her in a pumpkin shell
And there he kept her very well.
After the ball, after the finery,
Cinderella’s coach turns into a pumpkin shell.
Yes that was what that was all about” (1980, 188).

Still the myth lives on: women’s trap is her salvation, her identity, her reason for existence.

The myth of “room” has also been a continuing myth within women’s writings and offers images of inner space denied externally. As the myth of home exists for the convenience of others, the imagery of room denotes a personal space, singular and sacred for women. Coexisting with the myth of the entrapment, women have placed the “room” in otherness. Ellen S. Richards (in her article “The Cost of Shelter,” written in 1916) stated: “The comfort in living is far more in the brain than in the back.” The imagery of real space continues to exist in the mind. Rika Lesser writes: “I try to keep my house within my head” (Torre, 1977, 186). Marilyn French (1980, 77) puts it quite adamantly when she writes: “It takes room, the room to choose, the room to entertain possibilities.” Women have not had the room. It has been controlled and ordered by others. French (1980, 50) also alludes to the idea that men have many “compartments” for their women, sports, work, etc. and in each space they act differently, while women have only one room and act the same whatever they do. Mary Daly revisions the imagery, “as she creates her self, she creates new space, semantics, cognitive, symbolic, psychic, physical spaces. She moves into these spaces and finds room to breathe, to breathe forth further spaces” (Daly, 1990, 340). The imagery changes from

room to rooms, new spaces, physical spaces as women’s new experience of self-revising myth.

Sacred Place

Elizabeth Dodson Gray (1988) in her book, *Sacred Dimensions of Women’s Experience*, defines sacred space as a “magic ring, a ring of sanctification ... consecrated by the dailyness of incredible nurturing care.” The definition is boundary restricted and centers on mothering, reinforcing once again women’s spiritual confinement to the domestic imagery. Annis Pratt defines sacred space as “the sanctuaries and rooms into which women withdraw from society ... fantastic but in a positive sense (Pratt, 1981, 165). They are projections of an ideal world.” The power is to create new ways of being for women in new worlds. By creating new worlds for new beings, a new definition of sacred place is created. This space is dynamic; it affords movement. There is a real sense of fluid motion, energy, excitement, and empowerment. There is freedom. The imagery of the mystical force, “magic circle” is alien to an image of the empowering spiral, which allows movement by its form but also is managed by its own internal integrity. It allows movement simultaneously inward and outward by self-propulsion. Everyone has watched a slinky go down the stairs and marveled at its seemingly innate ability to be self-propelled, self-directed, flexible, expansible and contractible, controlled, and ordered all at the same time. It seems to have a life and power of its own. This reimagining of sacred space as a dynamic spiral transforms boundaries from solid enclosures of space, to movements which occupy space.

The spiral image of sacred place applies easily to physical space. It acknowledges the order and the discipline of an interior domain, entrusting the responsibility for self-protection, self-assertion, self-expansion, and self-actualization to the woman, while maintaining control and order. Mary Daly uses a similar imagery when she refers to women as “Spinning Voyagers,” creating centers within movement. The spiral imagines a vast space while remaining intimately connected. Rooted in revisioned myth, the revisioning of the spatial imagery of sacred spaces grant the possibility for transformation. Only through entering a space that is psychically innovative is it possible to fundamentally affect one’s nature and outwardly affect the environment (Fryer, 1986, 310).

As the rhythm became faster and more complex, the normally docile women threw off their wraps and danced

with movements that were unrestrained and frankly erotic.... Their pent-up emotions, so repressed in everyday life, were released in the uninhibited motion. Tensions drained in a catharsis of freedom...(Auel, 1980, 93).

This imagery originates in a new myth of the sacred. Even though Jean Auel writes of ancient times, her language is of today, and she writes of sacred places. To be truly free is to create dynamic spaces in which women are free to dance, to spin, to imagine, to journey. Women's spiraling sacred places are places which are tactile, physical, "frankly" erotic, spiritual, mediative, and mystical (Fryer, 1986, 301).

Physical, Erotic, Spiritual, Mediative, Mystical

Space is experienced by engaging the senses. If woman's unique experience impacts her sensory approach, then her aesthetics, i.e., relationship to matter and material, her perception, her means of processing tactile and temporal rhythms can express itself in a distinctive form.

The question then is: Is there a feminist aesthetic? This may be true as an aesthetic awareness, or modes of sensory perceptions, and not necessarily as a theory of art, although Bovenschen in "Is There A Feminist Aesthetic?" seemingly takes a revisionist approach when she writes that feminine artistic production takes place by means of a complicated process involving conquering and reclaiming, appropriating and formulating, as well as forgetting and subverting. This can be found both in artistic tradition as well as breaking with it (Ecker, 1986, 47-49). Virginia Woolf (1929, 87) writes:

The rooms differ so completely, they are calm or thunderous, open on to the sea, or on the contrary, give on to a prison yard; are hung with washing, or alive with opals and silks; are hard as horse hair, or soft as feathers—one has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one's face.

The complexity of women's spirit may need to be unraveled before a feminine aesthetic will truly be defined.

Simone de Beauvoir severely doubted that the female body could provide a new vision of the world (Ecker, 1986, 33). Van Vliet in *Women, Housing, Community* (1988, 3) states that "it is hard to conceive of a theoretical frame work from which to derive such uniquely feminist guidelines," guidelines which could offer a

solution to real life issues. Revisionist theory offers that a feminist aesthetic is possible; however, it may be far too early to assess its ability to impact real issues, although based upon the above discussion transformation is possible. Ultimately, the definition must be a truly human one, not theory in abstraction or isolation, because a narrow definition would create its own bondage, become culturally invisible and lack forms to visualize the meaning (Tregebow, 1987, 136-137).

Physical

Women have been confined, restricted to the space of one's body, and not even allowed to acknowledge that. Spaciousness has always been a luxury for women. Spaciousness implies freedom to move, great spaces in which to lodge "her" universe (Fryer, 1986, 49-50). The image of vessel has long been an archetypal form of the feminine, and the power over the mysteries of life has been preserved in this symbol. It orders boundaries and its enclosures. As an archetypal form it defines "dwelling," as the sacred domain of women, both controlling her and ordering her as she orders and controls, eliminating any possibility of freedom (Neumann, 1963, 282). This has been done even to the point, as discussed earlier, as a means of control of social problems by ordering domestic space, without regard to the damage inflicted upon woman's spirit. The outcome has been disastrous. Under male-oriented repetitive space frame, places in which women dwell have been defined by language created by men, designed by men and built by men without female input or alternative choices of organization and design. Women have always transformed these empty dens with bric-a-brac and surface expressions of domestic tranquillity. The vessel imagery as an archetypal symbol of the feminine should provide empowerment and transformation for women, but for great spans of time it has imprisoned her spirit and kept her in her wrongful place.

Jung built in stone a mythic structure in order to learn to inhabit a world of words and symbols to which he belonged by right. The stone and permanence of his tradition (Fryer, 1986, 339) validated his existence. Women have the same right to claim through shape and structure, a spaciousness in which to actualize their uniqueness not confined to a domestic reality. This need for a reawakening of sensitivity of physical space, an actualization of sacred place, should be of primary importance for women (Ecker, 1986, 128).

Erotic

Through the exploration of myth residing within women's collective experience of their unconscious, their dreams, their psyche, women have become aware of "self," body and spirit, and realize that the two are one. There is no hierarchical division, as in Jung and Erich Neumann's versions of the female Being, into Sky Goddess and Earth Mother. Female writers do have the tendency to reunite the flesh and the spirit into an integrated whole. The result is a revolt against defining the universe into sacred and profane space, redeeming and uniting that which has been excluded and rejected. Reclaiming self and annihilating the edge, relocating directly in the center, creates a new definition of sacred (Ostriker, 1986, 219, 195–197).

Placing spirituality within the body is the undeniable acknowledgment of the erotic, and the embracing of the feminine sexuality is an integral part of sacred. Women's sexuality provides a sacred joy which when embraced creates movement, new space, a new sense of authenticity of "her" universe (Ostriker, 1986, 220). Images and form replace words, locating meaning in the incomplete pieces of memory (Fryer, 1986, 320). Fryer in talking about Willa Cather states:

concentration on her inner vision, she pares down language so that words exist as objects, physical things implying spiritual connectedness, as she searches for a form simple and pure enough to express her desire, to contain it exactly. (Fryer, 1986, 291)

The power of language is in its ability to connect the body and the spirit.

Spiritual, Mediative, Mystical

Spirituality is at the center. In many cultures the tower, the pole, the pillar has symbolized the center of sacred place connecting the upper and lower cosmos. Because of the unified self, women place themselves at the center. We are the center. There is no pillar or tower. There is no separation, no hierarchy, all is one. By finding the center of one's boundless desire, and to give form to it, is a creation of sacred space (Fryer, 1986, 338, 293). Sacred place becomes the physical form originated in myths both personal and collective by which women affirm their unique identity.

Space

Space is by no means a neutral entity. It is a formidable task to impact such a cultural mediator, but there has always been the belief that environments, particularly domestic environments, bring about social change (Torre, 1977, 127). In periods of social stability, space is shaped by culturally accepted values, and reinforces these values. However, during periods of transition, when the difficult task of value changing is going on, such as today, when economic and political systems and their ideological supports do not conform to values and needs of specific segments of society, when the myth changes, physical forms are seen as inadequate and inappropriate. In order to make significant changes to physical space, social values need to change and to be integrated into the socio-political fabric (Birch, 1985, 251).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *Herland* states that the patriarchal modes of competition upon which our socio-economic system is based must change because it is antithetical to the female experience (Fryer, 1986, 41). Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* believes that financial independence and a room of one's own is the solution to women's plight, but in order for the socio-economic system to change, the physical environment must also change. Then women can enjoy economic freedom (Fryer, 1986, 38). A woman's needs are linked to "her" role in society and to the decision making processes linked to that role, which directly impact those spaces which she occupies. The chances that women can significantly alter the landscape are slim, because of how the present socio-political system and design profession are aligned (Mazey, 1983, 66).

Feminist critics have been analyzing women's writings for over ten years and although much has been written and critiqued about women's changing role in social and economic terms, the physical environment seems to be taken for granted or generally overlooked (Van Vliet, 1988, 1–3). Most women architects, like women writers, are outside the mainstream practice and the present socio-political structures (Werkerle, 1980, 214). Architectural schools and the professional community are still male domains, and women are seldom in positions of power. The power to birth a physical form is a "God" mythology which will not be easily rewritten.

Adele Chatfield-Taylor in "You Can't Make a Silk Purse Out of Suburbia," writes: "Architecture is, next to men, the most oppressive force in our society, obsolete architecture is one of the things that is holding us back" (Torre, 1977, 167-168). Architecture does lag behind in developing a viable feminist critique. It has yet to come to grips with the fact that little or no input by women has gone into architectural forms, while these same forms impact women's lives (Tregebow, 1987, 129-131).

Birnkey and Weisman (1975) state: "If women's needs are to be environmentally supported, then each woman must become her own architect, that is, she must become aware of the ability to exercise environmental judgment and make decisions about the nature of spaces in which she lives and works." There has been a reluctance among women designers to use existing architectural forms because of the patriarchal message of dominance and power which they envision, even to the point of creating anti-architecture—no architecture. Women have not wanted to identify themselves with any built form because of its inherent imagery (Torre, 1977, 161, 132). Women's spaces have been a language of control and submission. However, as difficult as it is to confront this stronghold on symbology, it is necessary for women not to back down from the challenge of transforming the language and the message, and begin the task of form-making. Revisioning forms creates new expressions of spatial imagery which can support and nurture those spaces which women inhabit on a daily basis.

Women and Architecture

What is important is that what has been imposed upon women through the oppressive value system of the present socio-political system not be further perpetuated in women's aesthetics (Ecker, 1986, 16). Going where women have created spaces for themselves, or going where women have temporarily made space for themselves and their activities presents the opportunity for form-making (Ecker, 1986, 132). Transitional housing is an initial phase in the evolution/revolution of women's spaces. The woman in crisis has felt threatened and insecure both inside and outside the home to the point that the situation has become intolerable (Refuerzo, 1990, 34). The psycho-social loss is exacerbated by a corresponding loss of control over the immediate spatial environment and one's life. Crisis intervention does provide a limited time of safe haven, but because of the highly traumatized situation in which such women find themselves the woman, in most cases, may not be capable of reconnecting with "her" space as an essential component of the healing process. As

women have been denied space for a long time, reclamation becomes important for all women, but particularly for those who suffer displacement due to inhabiting "unsafe" spaces.

Transitional housing harkens back to women's cooperative housing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Each of these experiments in living was unique, but all were based on the principle of equality and acceptance (Mazey, 1983, 62). Transitional housing can provide the means by which new lives through revisioning and concepts of sacred places can facilitate new kinds of structures as a real force for change. It can connect individuals to the greater universal myth of human existence, allowing women to feel the essential connection to the greater whole and begin the much needed process of healing. This type of housing can also be the beginning of the transformation of women's built environments, transforming the individual, and ultimately transforming the society and the language of the built form.

Women always remain individuals and their sacred places remain uniquely their own. Residents of transitional housing need to be in control of their environments. Boundaries need to be fluid but under direct control of the woman. Women's concern for safety and security are in direct proportion to how much uncertainty has been alleviated. In talking about their newly installed transitional housing, the director of the Boulder County Safehouse, a crisis intervention center for battered women in Boulder, Colorado, stated that the need for control goes as far as to include control over natural light, hot water, heat, and room temperature. Refuzero's (1990, 46, 49) study of four shelters in Los Angeles and two in New Orleans reiterates this need to control one's immediate environment as a means of coping with the lack of control in one's life. According to the study, the job of the shelter is to buffer out unwanted visual elements and noise, creating a calm, non-chaotic setting while allowing surveillance of site and quality views of the surrounding environments. The spiral imagery of sacred place promotes the layering of spaces from public to private, which remain flexible and expandable, subject to the needs of the residents. Through design, transitional housing can address broader issues such as economic opportunities, and can be organized to blend the physical needs of shelter, the economic advantages of sharing, and the social aspects of community service (Birch, 1985, 44-45).

However, the most important element that transitional housing can provide is sacred space, a sacred place for

each woman, independent of any living space, but a space specifically catering to the woman's spirit. The idea of the French "boudoir" may have come the closest to this concept. In a 1987 interview in the Boulder Daily Camera newspaper, Lizzie Borden, the film-maker of the movie, *Working Girls*, a documentary about "madam" houses stated: "There was a kind of a drawing room atmosphere. It's so much of a woman's space...." It should be remembered that the patriarchal society has done an exceptional job of defining its reality by creating sacred places as an outward manifestation of its mythological roots. These sacred places have translated into hierarchical structures, such as churches and as skyscrapers, separate from everyday existence, but visual and ideological perpetuators of the mythology. Woman's sacred reality is a necessary and integral part of her life. It is not hierarchical and separate, but it is distinct and it is essential that it be acknowledged as a real part of her environment.

This requires there be an actual physical space from which woman's daily life radiates outward into the everyday world. The imagery of the spiral reorients the dwelling from a box polarity to one of radiating spokes, layers, or nodes. Mary Daly (1990, 396-397) uses the imagery of a spider's web as a spiral net diverging from a central point where the spider sits as the symbol of the center of the world. Judith Thuman writes: "My life alone within that room has evolved a precise shape, a formality like that of a web" (Torre, 1977, 188). The power is that the architectural form would change, be revisioned, and the language right along with it, because women could choose freely from a range of potentially available "neutral" architectural forms with their capacities for new narrative and symbolic expression based upon a new vision of sacred place (Tregebow, 1987, 142). The imagery of radiating spokes is an adaptable imagery to possess and to translate, to form-make, to revision form. It is "room which breathes forth more rooms" (Daly, 1990, 340). Women would have a sense of their own space as a tangible reality, validating and empowering outward from the center of their being. The difference is that it is a dynamic revision based upon women's own unique interpretation of their mythological experience. The rootedness in the revisioned myth manifested in women's sacred space would allow for success where it has not existed. It would be powerful because of this grounding. This reorientation could be so empowering that, a truly human transformation could result from which a new language of community would emerge.

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