

Book review

A Gendered Profession: The Question of Representation in Space Making

James Benedict Brown, Harriet Harriss, Ruth Morrow and James Soane (eds).
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This small paperback comprises a collection of 32 chapters written by over 40 people from architectural practice, academia and journalism, on the subject of how gender shapes the nature of the architectural profession, and thus the lives and careers of individual architects. In terms of gender around 15 of the authors are men and the rest women, mainly from the UK but with a sprinkling of international contributors too. Of necessity the chapters are all quite short. They are also quite variable in terms of style and quality, ranging from the sketchy and journalistic, through to thoroughly researched and fully referenced academic contributions. In particular there are several solid, serious chapters written by women architects addressing long-recognised problems concerning discrimination, career progression, childcare and the overarching male-dominated professional subculture. But these contrast with, and sit uneasily alongside some much shallower, light-weight, and dare I say rather pretentious and incomprehensible chapters.

In the introduction the editors do acknowledge that there is still a problem for women, and they note that the gender imbalance has not shifted much over 30 years, especially since 92 per cent of women architects with children said this put them at a disadvantage in the profession. The book's blurb states that it provides the first ever attempt to move the debate about architecture and gender beyond the traditional 'gender segregated diagnosis' (which I think means 'women architects moaning') to 'a more propositional and transformative approach' (which I think means 'men contributors writing how gender affects them, plus some coverage of gay issues'). In reality, there is already a range of books and research that takes the study of gender (and sexuality) in architecture beyond the feminist binary male/female debates (such as Williams, 2013), albeit with a greater emphasis upon the implications for architectural design.

Indeed, one of the weaknesses of this book is the apparent lack of sociological context or awareness of previous relevant academic research, which results in some contributors innocently imaging their revelations and insights are 'new' and what the world has been waiting for. Curiously, a photo of a Gender Neutral Toilet (a GNT) appears alongside the text (page 8) without explanation. I think the editors are trying to

signal by this photo their 'trendiness'. They are trying to show their awareness that modern fourth wave feminism appears more inclusive for all, as gender is no longer be seen as a male/female binary but as a continuum: hence the trend for desegregating public toilets (which is actually a very controversial issue for many women whatever their sexuality). The editors also recognize that men, as well as women, have their lives shaped by gender expectations and pressures.

Why is the book of interest to town planners, urban geographers and social researchers? The editorial introduction states that the architectural profession claims to be concerned with providing society with 'better buildings, communities and the environment' (page 7 of Editorial). However, another weakness is that this book does not contain much about actual design issues, as to how buildings and urban space might be designed 'differently', as informed by this 'new' gender and sexuality consciousness amongst architects. In spite of the book's title, there is very little about 'space making' as such. Instead there are a few policy recommendations for change, mainly related to professional career matters. Consequently this publication seems strangely detached from the vast amount of material that already exists in this field, for example in the book edited by the architects Madariago and Roberts (2013), which includes many examples on how gender awareness is changing the design of buildings and cities across Europe.

Nevertheless, the collection provides an interesting angle on many familiar issues. The book is divided into four parts. Part 1, *Practice, Politics and Economics*, comprises 9 chapters which are meant to show how the question of identity is inextricably linked to the evolving politics of gender. This starts by reconsidering the issues regarding 'women in architecture', discussing (again) why women leave architecture and why those that are still around to make it to senior positions may still be rendered invisible. Some contextual statistics (that there are still not that many women in architecture and most are at the bottom of the pile) are mentioned at the beginning. There is then a big leap before statistics are discussed again on page 260. Throughout the book there is little reference to class, race or other factors that might mitigate or increase gender discrimination. This is odd in that a feature of fourth wave feminism is the acknowledgement of the power of 'intersectionality': that is, how class, race, background, location, sexuality inter alia – as well as gender - all shape a person's life chances (Bagilhole, 2009). This issue is not discussed until chapter 28, and then only briefly.

The book first came to my attention because of the notoriety of the 'photo-shopping' incident discussed in chapter two written by Sandra Manley and Ann de Graft-Johnson, who are well known for having produced the RIBA-commissioned, research study on 'Why do Women Leave Architecture' for the RIBA (De Graft-Johnson et al., 2005). Indeed, many of the other chapters in this book also cite this work. Here they show two photographs, before and after photo shopping. The only senior woman architect, Pattie Hopkins (equal partner with Michael Hopkins), to feature in a television documentary entitled, '*The Brits who Built the Modern World*', was cut out of the BBC promotional photograph, so it appeared to the public that only male architects, could be 'great architects'. The usual suspects were left in, namely: Norman Foster, Richard Rogers, Nicholas Grimshaw, Terry Farrell and Michael Hopkins.

While such high fliers gain the plaudits and awards, in the profession as a whole men as well as women suffer career attrition and struggles too as they grow older and seek to progress within the profession, as chapters 3 and 4 illustrate. Although this tends to happen to a minority of male architects, the people affected are generally those who do not want to conform to the values and gender pressures of the dominant male culture. In Chapter 4, a male architect writing under the pseudonym of 'Doric' explains the pressures that family and school expectations, and masculinity have

placed upon him. Overall there are some excellent, well-researched chapters in Part I, which highlight that a culture of long hours, presentee-ism, working full time, and trying to prove you are 'serious' have always been doubly difficult for women, particularly those with small children. There are strong parallels here with the problems and choices encountered by women in planning.

Part II, *Histories, Theories and Pioneers*, comprises 8 chapters which broaden out the debate both in terms of drawing on lessons from the 'histories' of past pioneer architects and also adding an international dimension through parallel examples from abroad. For example, chapter 13 looks at the changes that have enabled women in Spain to make progress as architects in the post-Franco era. Part II also moves on from the binary male/female basics of Part I to consider queer issues (chapter 15) and the ways in which gay architects have been rendered invisible, both in history and in the present, drawing on life stories of gay male architects from Germany (chapter 10). It is significant that Part II contains contributions from five male architects, with at least three of them writing about gay and queer issues, a topic that is barely mentioned by the women authors. Few of the male authors mention the problems of childcare or other practical issues that so beset women architects, although to its credit the book does include some pictures of small children (usually playing with building blocks) and architect families, thus acknowledging the existence of the invisible 'private realm' of home life.

Part III, *Place, Participation and Identity*, is perhaps the most relevant to urban planners, as it promises to look at wider issues such as climate change, gentrification and health, and to issues of urban conservation and regeneration. It comprises 7 chapters with five male authors, two of which are about the demise of 'queer pubs' and the role of LGBTQ activists in identifying and protecting such buildings and venues. These chapters are quite interesting from the urban regeneration perspective, and, at last, include some urban policy and design issues. However, they do not necessarily link to the gendered problems of working in architecture, which are so strongly featured in women's chapters. I had expected something on GNTs in this section, given they were mentioned with a photo in the introduction and are such a visible trans issue at present, but there is nothing.

Part IV, simply entitled *Education*, returns to a more feminist perspective, structured around traditional male/female binaries again. The female authors draw on traditional feminist analysis in discussing the role that education plays in perpetuating gender inequality, especially for women in a world structured around a master-pupil relationship and the dreaded 'crit sessions' (which many planning schools also still operate). There are also recommendations for architectural schools to move towards a more gender equitable environment in running their courses. Based on my research experience over the years, I would say that education is not such a problem compared with what happens in the real world: and so at the training stage women need to be forewarned and equipped for dealing with the harsh realities of going out into practice. The book rather abruptly ends with Chapter 32, entitled 'Symbolic Violence' which starts from an old fashioned feminist perspective in arguing that architectural education and practice can seriously harm women. Yet in complete contrast the author then goes on to say that we can all learn a lot from Le Corbusier because he was a feminist and supporter of women. This claim is hardly borne out in the inconvenient and gender-blind way he designed cities, with vast walking distances between different zones (Greed, 2013; Greed and Johnson, 2014). There is no plenary concluding chapter bringing all the themes together, or making recommendations for the future, something which in my view editors of such collections should always include as a matter of principle.

I found Part IV to be the most relevant and interesting part of the book, even though much of it is more about practice than education, as might have been expected from its title. Overall, certain chapters sit uneasily in the particular Parts of the book to which they have been assigned, partly due to the considerable overlap of themes between and among these different sections. The book could have done with some serious editing to demonstrate more clearly the linkages between the chapters. It comes across basically as a 'women in architecture' book with some add-on chapters by men, which are not well integrated into the whole. That said, there are some real gems, and some high-quality well researched chapters alongside some rather less valuable contributions. In the end, though, the abiding impression is that style has triumphed over substance, the 'cool' uber-chic design of the book detracting from its contents through its series of arty (but seldom explained) photos and graphics, and the use of hard-to-read type setting and a grey shade of a small sans serif font.

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- Williams, R. (2013) *Sex and Buildings: Modern Architecture and the Sexual Revolution*. London: Reaktion Books (especially Chapter 7, 'What would a feminist city look like?' 146-166).