

The feminist critique of architecture

Learning from Denise Scott Brown and Frances Bradshaw

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Abstract Against the backdrop of Betty Friedan's account of women's experience in suburban America, a feminist critique of architecture started to take form in the seventies and eighties. The main divide between what is called equality feminism and difference feminism, is very clearly reflected in the writings of feminists and architects who were active in the field at the time. For this paper I will focus specifically on Denise Scott Brown and Frances Bradshaw. I will look at how different feminisms were translated into very different feminist critiques of architecture. After that I will look at parallels and differences between both women's writings, in order to establish how their work is still relevant today, when seen from a post-structuralist perspective.

Keywords: Architecture, Second-wave Feminism, Denise Scott Brown, Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative.

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Resumo Nos anos setenta e oitenta – começando pela obra de Betty Friedan, que descreveu as experiências de mulheres na América suburbana – começou a desenvolver-se uma crítica feminista da arquitetura. A rutura entre um “feminismo da diferença” e um “feminismo da igualdade” está claramente refletida nos escritos de feministas e arquitetas que trabalhavam com esta temática nessa altura. Neste artigo pesquisarei os casos de Denise Scott Brown e Frances Bradshaw. O objetivo é analisar de que forma diferentes feminismos foram convertidos em críticas feministas de arquitetura distintas. Pretendo traçar as semelhanças e as diferenças entre os escritos destas duas mulheres e perguntar de que modo as suas ideias podem contribuir para a crítica feminista de arquitetura da atualidade, numa perspetiva pós-estruturalista.

Palavras-chave: Arquitetura, Feminismo da segunda vaga, Denise Scott Brown, Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative.



INTRODUCTION

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* from 1963 starts a new period of feminist awareness and the development of new principles and thoughts on how to improve the lives of women in a male-dominated world. It is against the background of the suburban developments, the new urban model, that Friedan describes “The Problem that has no name” (Friedan, 1963, p. 20). It is therefore also no surprise that the new feminist ideas that followed reached the world of architecture soon after, creating a growing awareness of the discrimination against women within the field. Especially in the nineties, a growing body of theoretical work dealing with issues of gender in architecture developed. In particular Weisman's *Discrimination by design: A feminist critique of the man-made environment* (1994), Duncan's *Bodyspace: Destabilizing geographies of gender and sexuality* (1996), and Rendell's *Gender, space, architecture: An interdisciplinary introduction* (2000) are noteworthy here. Since then, a lot has happened. Under the influence of a post-structuralist approach of both feminism and architecture, the debate moved from questions about women in architecture to a more general critique of gender and heteronormative bias in the discipline (Heynen, 2001). Most noteworthy here is Bonnevier's book *Behind straight*

curtains: Towards a queer feminist theory of architecture from 2007. In this work she takes Judith Butler's deconstruction of the gender binary and her performativity theory and applies it to architecture, in an attempt to understand how gender is embedded in architectural spaces. This approach moves away from just looking at the position of women (or other minorities) in architecture to the deconstruction of architecture as a system of knowledge production, as an institution and as both the subject and object of power relations. At the same time, in the current climate, although the amount of female students has steadily increased since the beginning of the 20th century, the number of female architects in the field is still very low. On top of that, most internationally renowned architects are still predominantly male. According to Jane Rendell "[...] women in architectural practice continue to fall between those who wish to remain gender neutral and those who aim to make explicit their feminist intentions" (Rendell, 2000, p. 226).

In this paper I would like to address the feminist critique of architecture that started in the eighties from women within the field. More specifically I will look at two texts written by practicing architects in order to investigate how theoretical developments in feminism were translated into architectural discourse. The first one is Denise Scott Brown's text *Room at the top? Sexism and the star system in architecture* from 1989. The second one is Frances Bradshaw's book *Matrix, making space: Women and the man-made environment*, from 1984. I will argue that although both texts represent a very different approach to feminism, parallel to the different feminisms developing at the time, issues raised in both works are essential to understanding the various points where architecture and feminism intersect. At the same time, although looking at these texts from a post-structuralist perspective would in both cases reveal a problematic relation to gender, the main arguments and themes remain very relevant to this day. I will argue that a new reading of these texts, can highlight some of the work that is still to be done today, and might indicate some further points of investigation.

In what follows I will introduce the two architects I will be discussing and frame their respective practice and theoretical work. After that I will move on to analyze both texts. As we will see, both authors approach the question of feminism and architecture from a very different perspective. In *Gender, space, architecture*, Rendell develops the idea that women writing about feminist issues in architecture speak from two different positions;

those who follow the principles of equality and those who follow the principles of difference, similar to what happened during the second wave of feminism (Rendell, 2000). Hilde Heynen argues that, starting from a different approach to gender differences, both of them produce critique on two levels: on the architecture itself, and on the institute around architecture (Heynen, 2001). A similar divide can be found between Denise Scott Brown and Frances Bradshaw.

DENISE SCOTT BROWN

Denise Scott Brown is one of the most important architects of the second part of the 20th century, together with her husband Robert Venturi. They are known both for their architectural projects as for their groundbreaking theoretical work. Their most important book *Learning from Las Vegas*, published in 1972, is one of the most important theoretical works of the past fifty years. It was translated in over eighteen languages and it is considered one of the major texts in the emergence of postmodernism. Denise Scott Brown, as well as her husband, also teaches at major American universities. Apart from her work together with Robert Venturi, she is also known for her publication *Room at the top? Sexism and the star system in architecture* (Scott Brown, 1989) in which she talks about the various forms of discrimination she has faced and faces in her own architecture practice.

I will argue that Scott Browns approach to architecture is based on equality feminism, starting from the principle that men and women are essentially the same, and have the same capacities. There is however an unequal distribution of power in space, and this produces discrimination. This discrimination not only takes place in architectural practice, but is built into the way we structure space (Heynen, 2001). When we look at the history of architecture theory, it was always the male body that served as a model or metaphor for architecture (Agrest, 1993). This specific corporeal model has resulted in a series of binary oppositions that continue to dominate architectural thinking to the present day. Starting from the Cartesian mind/body dualism, spatial concepts are linked to the male/female division (Duncan, 1996). This model results in spatial conceptual pairs such as interior/exterior, or structure/decoration, where architecture is seen as a

masculine profession, and interior design as a feminine one. But one of the most important ways of regulating the spatial organization of gender and sexuality has been the distinction between public and private space (Duncan, 1996). This structure can be linked to the distinction between the rational and the emotional, in which the former is strictly male and the latter strictly female. Reason is situated in the political public space, that is considered neutral and the space of objective knowledge, and emotion is situated in private space, associated with subjectivity and the body, more specifically the body of women (Alcoff, 1996). The division between public and private space inscribes gender in the organization of our society.

Rendell argues that there are two profiles of female architects that both follow principles of gender equality. First of all, there are a lot of women who do not wish to raise gender issues in relation to their design work: “[...] Many women architects have chosen, and still choose, to remain invisible, preferring to operate as ‘architects’ and not to emphasize their female status” (Rendell, 2000, p. 228). Although many women architects recognize the importance of feminist critics in promoting the work of women, or in fighting for causes such as equal payment, but this does not mean that women should change design practices. In fact, from this perspective, one could argue that several women have made it to the top and/or run an architectural firm. Another very common way for women to participate in architectural practice is in the form of a partnership with a male architect: “This model has provided them with a stable and often high profile form of practice.” (Rendell, 2000, p. 228) For many women, it offers the possibility to combine a high profile career with having a family.

In what follows I will try to outline the main concerns Scott Brown deals with in her text. The central idea behind it is that the higher you get to the top, the more difficult it becomes for women, and the more discrimination they have to face. The central problem is the Star System in architecture. This term is used to refer to the creation of “Starchitects”, the idols of architecture. They are internationally acclaimed architects, who are usually involved in prestigious projects, and whose buildings are characterized by their spectacular and unique shapes and materials. These stars are developed within the practice as well as through the media and critics. Because of their iconic buildings, they often also become famous to a broader public. By creating these stars, instead of acknowledging the work

of a team, all the credit goes to the most famous member (Heynen, 2001). In architectural history, this stardom is usually a men's privilege. The Pritzker Prize, architecture's most prestigious international award, illustrates this phenomenon very well. Since 1979, two women have made it as laureates, the first one being Zaha Hadid in 2004. Robert Venturi was awarded the Pritzker price in 1991, without Denise Scott Brown, as nominating more than one architect wasn't possible until 2001, when two men won the award.

Scott Brown describes how her career changed drastically when she married Venturi and joined his practice. Because Venturi was at the moment a rising star, Scott Brown started experiencing more and more difficulty to get the right credits for her work within their practice. She continuously had to face up to journalists and critics who would leave her name out, even when both she and her husband explicitly told them otherwise. Because of Venturi's mythical qualities as a star, the public could not accept her role in the firm being anything other than complementary: "The star system sees the firm as a pyramid with a Designer on top" (Scott Brown, 1989, p. 260). As Scott Brown states, the problem is that, although within the architectural practice it is perfectly possible for women to function at the top of a company, it is the system or the culture around it that fails to recognize them. In reality a design is always made by a team, and never by one person. The discrimination goes from articles that talk about Venturi's work in projects that are completely her work, to "job interviews where the presence of 'the architect's wife' distressed the board, dinners I must not attend because an influential member of the client group wants 'the architect' as her date; Italian journalists who ignore Bob's request that they address me because I understand more Italian than he does [...]" (Scott Brown, 1989, p. 259).

At this point in her career, she starts to actively engage in discussing this subject: "Although I had been concerned with my role as a woman years before the rebirth of the movement, I was not pushed to action until my experience as an architect's wife" (Scott Brown, 1989, p. 260). Scott Brown has given several lectures and spoken on many conferences about women in architecture. She critiques the macho culture, the authoritarian way in which architecture students are taught, and the obsession for creating stars that results from it. Without all this, she argues, "[...] architects would feel less need for gurus, and those they would need would be different, more responsible and humane than gurus are asked to be today" (Scott Brown,

1989, p. 262). It is remarkable to note that although she started giving lectures for women in the seventies, and wrote a first version of the article in 1975, she decided not to publish it at that time, out of fear for the negative impact of explicit feminist critique on her career and her firm. The male world of critics has a big amount of power and influence when it comes to making or breaking one's career, and in their race for status and success they continue to show hostility towards women: "In the last twenty years, I cannot recall one major article by a high-priest critic about a woman architect" (Scott Brown, 1989, p. 264).

To make things worse, although her work in addressing women's issues may have made her an authority in that area, it also has drawn all the attention to her position as a woman, when all she wants, is for her work as an architect to be recognized: "For a few years, writers on architecture were interested in sexism and the feminist movement and wanted to discuss them with me. In a joint interview, they would ask Bob about work and question me about my 'woman's problem'. 'Write about my work!' I would plead, but they seldom did." (Scott Brown, 1989, p. 264). Nevertheless she continues to believe in the importance of feminist awareness for young women in architecture. Because the higher they get into a firm, the more difficult it will be for them: "On seeing their male colleagues draw out in front of them, women who lack a feminist awareness are likely to feel that their failure to achieve is their own fault." (Scott Brown, 1989, p. 264). As an ambitious and successful architect, she believes that men and women can perfectly be at the top together, but that society is not yet willing to accept them in any other position than as the wife, or as a female architect.

FRANCES BRADSHAW

Matrix was formed in 1980 as a separation from the Feminist Design Collective, which was founded in 1978. The co-operative worked on several projects such as exhibitions, architectural work, and the book *Matrix, making space: Women and the man-made environment*, which I will use for this analysis. The practice was organized in an egalitarian way, where every worker was paid the same wage, and where there was no hierarchical power structure. All through the eighties, they were active in the UK, both

as architects of publicly funded social projects, and as technical and design advisors for many projects. In the book, Bradshaw describes several projects the co-operative was involved in. It gives a very good idea about how they organized their practice and how their design method tries to emphasize a female approach to spaces and buildings. Their theory and practice is clearly positioned in difference feminism.

A feminism of difference developed in reaction to the fact that equality feminism failed to recognize some the specificities of being a woman. It is primarily based on the idea that although men and women are equal, they are also fundamentally different. This difference does not only refer to a biological or genetic difference but also to differences based on female socialization, where different characteristics are emphasized or dominant (Heynen, 2001), in other words, “(sexual) difference is assumed to be an immutable fact, its meaning inherent in the categories female and male” (Scott, 1988, p. 44). According to Rendell, there are three things that characterize architectural projects based on the principles of difference. First of all, they explicitly define their feminist ambitions. Secondly they reject the architectural discipline as a whole for being based on patriarchal values. This usually results in women architects who try to organize their entire practice in a different way. A third characteristic is that, because of the essentialist nature of their difference principles, they “see femaleness and femininity as encompassing a set of qualities, which are quite different from maleness and masculinity” (Rendell, 2000, p. 229). This principle usually involves the belief that woman architects are to create an alternative environment to our man-made world, by using these feminine qualities: “Implicit within this work is a critique of architectural value systems and a suggestion that women have different priorities in the design of built spaces and suggestion of their production” (Rendell, 2000, p. 230).

Matrix Feminist Architectural Co-operative clearly has all three principles at the core of their philosophy. With their projects, they try to create a different way of practicing architecture. First of all it is clear that they choose projects for women, such as health centers, women’s workshops, children’s centers, where the client is usually represented by a group of women that represents the higher institution that actually pays the project. Secondly, they actively try to create a different environment for women’s everyday life: “If women collectively organize, design and make buildings that suit

their needs rather than having to fit into what exists already (buildings created by a patriarchal culture) then the buildings are bound to look and feel different” (Bradshaw, 1984, p. 283).

This unique setting allows them to work on a project as a group. This idea is central to their design strategy: to involve the client in the design process as much as possible. To do so they had to change their way of working in several ways. First of all, they had to find a way to talk about architecture with people who are not trained to do so: “We needed to find a language accessible to everyone involved. [...] It means starting from feelings about the spaces women know and their everyday experiences in them, and using that information to gradually build up a picture of the new space” (Bradshaw, 1984, p. 286). They start from the idea that the client group knows what they want, but don’t have the tools to transform that into a design. The architect’s job is to enable them to do so: “Matrix also ran a short course for the women who were to be particularly responsible for making design decisions” (Bradshaw, 1984, p. 287). Instead of positioning themselves as the experts, they try to share their knowledge with the client group, and they try to listen to every party involved.

Their experience led them to developing a specific set of design tools. Instead of presenting the client group with a finished product, they provided them with changeable models in which the women could experiment with different layouts themselves: “Women’s experiences in different workplaces became relevant and useful and each woman felt involved in the process. We did not necessarily come to conclusions about the design, but everyone understood the problem” (Bradshaw, 1984, p. 287). This way, they put great emphasis on the personal experience of everyone involved, and removed architecture from its elitist and intellectual pedestal. Matrix wants to give the women involved full control over the creation of their environment, and in that way empower them: “The question for us as feminist architects is, how do we use these skills to further the liberation of women?” (Bradshaw, 1984, p. 291). Matrix develops a system that is the exact opposite of standard architectural practice, where the architect is in charge of the design and takes all the creative decisions.

Matrix not only attacks common design techniques, but also the building practice itself. As Bradshaw states, they believe that the relation between architect, builders and client is based on a hierarchical power structure with

the architect on top. As I have already explained earlier, they clearly redefine the relation they have with the client. But according to them, the relationship the architect has with the builders is equally problematic, especially as female architects: “While the builder’s skills are at least as essential as the architect’s, they are not valued in the same way” (Bradshaw, 1984, p. 292). Bradshaw describes these relations as embedded in class differences, and therefore very difficult to deal with. Also, when dealing with male builders, woman architects are put in an uncomfortable position: “Woman architects are in an authoritative role, which class differences reinforce, yet as women they do not normally have authority over men” (Bradshaw, 1984, p. 292). One of their solutions is to learn building skills as architects, so that they can relate more to builder’s work. Also, they try to work with women builders as much as possible. Their central question is “how do we find a framework for working together, which is based on mutual trust in order to resolve these contradictions” (Bradshaw, 1984, p. 293).

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that a feminist approach of architecture can take many forms. Both women clearly define themselves as feminists, but the way in which they implement this in their professional career is very different. It is interesting to see how they initially both critique similar things, but because of their different perspective towards gender, their solutions are very different. Scott argues, “when equality and difference are paired dichotomously, they structure an impossible choice. If one opts for equality, one is forced to accept the notion that difference is antithetical to it. If one opts for difference, one admits that equality is unattainable” (Scott, 1988, p. 13). In creating an opposition between equality and difference, both approaches lack the necessary nuance to actually change the position of women in the field. If we go back to our two texts, we see that Scott Brown has managed to make it to the top, yet despite her position and her accomplishments, her situation remains the same; “the discrimination continues at the rate of about one incident a day” (Scott Brown, 1989, p. 264). She seems to be stuck in the middle between the belief that women can do the same as men, and her confrontation with the fact that society doesn’t view them as equally able. No matter what she does, she is still a woman architect,

instead of just an architect. At the same time, her analysis of the problem doesn't go further than the observation of the problem. Because of this it becomes very difficult to determine structural discrimination on the level of how architectural practices and media are organized. It is not merely that not everyone has yet accepted that men and women are equal; the problem goes much further than that. The example of the Star System is very telling. Architectural discourse has a history of understanding male and female roles in relation to architecture as something similar to the artist and his muse. The dominant role of the architect-creator is therefore always male. The personal relationship of Scott Brown and Venturi being wife and husband only enforces the way their roles in the firm are in fact an extension of the idea of dominant gender roles in society as a whole.

As for Frances Bradshaw and Matrix, they have managed to create a whole new architectural practice, inspired by a feminism of difference. A feminism of difference argues that women should use their singularity to create their own models, instead of conforming to male models (Heynen, 2001). Matrix has realized many projects, and the group probably made their clients very happy with the results. But they work in a very specific context; one they have created for themselves, which leaves them almost outside of normal architecture practice. This does not make their work less valuable or less important, but it does raise some questions about the feasibility of their project on a larger scale. They create a context of only women, and within this context their project succeeds, but outside of that, things are still the same. Whereas their critique of the intersection of class and gender in relation to builders is very interesting, the solution of only hiring female builders seems counter-productive. In other words, instead of changing the system, they have created an alternative parallel one. At the same time, presenting "women" as a uniform group risks making invisible differences between women. As Scott remarks "the sameness constructed on each side of the binary opposition hides the multiple play of differences and maintains their irrelevance and invisibility" (Scott, 1988, p. 46). Instead of valuing "female" characteristics over other "male" ones, the question should rather be which characteristics will benefit society as a whole. For example, ambition and success are not problematic as such, but become problematic when they are based on singling out the male genius over male and female collaborators.

What is interesting to see is how the construction of binaries, gender binaries and architectural binaries, is at the basis of both approaches, the binary between equality and difference being one major one. Scott has argued that:

When looked at closely, in fact, the historical arguments of feminists do not usually fall into these neat compartments; they are instead attempts to reconcile theories of equal rights with cultural concepts of sexual difference, to question the validity of normative constructions of gender in the light of the existence of behaviors and qualities that contradict the rules, to point up rather than resolve conditions of contradiction, to articulate a political identity for women without conforming to existing stereotypes about them. (Scott, 1988, p. 48)

To conclude I would like to go back to the Pritzker Prize incident, in order to draw a parallel to the current climate in architecture. In 2004, Zaha Hadid was the first woman to ever win a Pritzker Prize. In the weeks surrounding her getting the price, it became clear how much of the issues Scott Brown raised in the eighties, are still relevant to this day. Comments in the media ranged from describing her as excessive and a diva, to comments on her appearance, leading to many male critics questioning whether she even deserved the price at all. (Stratigakos, 2016) Hadid has said in the past that she was very hesitant to call herself a feminist for a long time, out of fear of being seen as merely a female architect. Yet after being confronted with numerous comments and critiques she decided to speak out. One of the most interesting parallels between the two texts discussed here is the emphasis on empowering women in the field. In Scott Browns case, by speaking out, she want to make women aware that discrimination is a problem they will encounter. In this way, she wants to break the silence for women in practice. By doing so she makes a first step towards braking the binary, by showing that being a part of high-profile architectural companies, and believing in equality between men and women, doesn't mean that discrimination isn't real. To render invisible such discourse out of fear of being seen even more as merely a female architect, does not make the problem go away. Matrix also works very much towards empowering women, more specifically by making them take control of the design of their own spaces. This form of

collaborative practice, built on a horizontal structure, does offer a real alternative to a more corporate model. Yet it risks on being exclusionary itself, if it is based on one 'model' of femininity.

So how can we imagine an architectural practice that does not position itself in the field of difference or equality, but which still addresses the problems in the field? Scott suggests that "the only alternative, it seems to me, is to refuse to oppose equality to difference and insist continually on differences - differences as the condition of individual and collective identities, differences as the constant challenge to the fixing of those identities, history as the repeated illustration of the play of differences, differences as the very meaning of equality itself." (Scott, 1988, p. 46) Such a practice would enable us to talk about differences without making it impossible to strive for equality. Such a practice would need to deconstruct architecture as reflective of socially constructed gender binaries and address the role of architectural and urban design as a system that enforces power relations. Such a practice would need both Denise Scott Brown's and Frances Bradshaw's critical voice.

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