

Prologue: Leslie Kanés Weisman

'Women's Environmental Rights: A Manifesto'

from *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* (1981)

Be it acknowledged:

The man-made environments which surround us reinforce conventional patriarchal definitions of women's role in society and spatially imprint those sexist messages on our daughters and sons. They have conditioned us to an environmental myopia which limits our self-concepts...which limits our visions and choices for ways of living and working...which limits us by not providing the environments we need to support our autonomy or by barring our access to them. It is time to open our eyes and see the political nature of this environmental oppression!

Architect Louis Sullivan, often referred to as the 'Father of the Skyscraper', described a building by his colleague Henry Hobson Richardson in this way:

Here is a man for you to look at, a virile force, an entire male. It stands in physical fact, a monument to trade, to the organized commercial spirit, to the power and progress of the age, to the strength and resource of individuality and force of character. Therefore I have called it, in a world of barren pettiness, a male, for it sings the song of procreant power, as others have squealed of miscegenation.

(Kindergarten Chats 1901)

ARCHITECTURE AS ICON

The built environment is a cultural artifact. It is shaped by human intention and intervention, a living archaeology through which we can extract the priorities and beliefs of the decision-makers in our society. Both the process through which we build and the forms themselves embody cultural values and imply standards of behavior which affect us all.

From the corporate towers of the wizards of industry to the Emerald City of the Wizard of Oz, men have created the built environment in their own self-image. The twentieth-century urban skyscraper, a pinnacle of patriarchal symbology, is rooted in the masculine mystique of the big, the erect, the forceful—the full balloon of the inflated masculine ego. Skyscrapers in our cities compete for individual recognition and domination while impoverishing human identity and the quality of life.

The home, the place to which women have been intimately connected, is as revered an architectural icon as the skyscraper. From early childhood women have been taught to assume the role of 'homemaker', 'housekeeper', and 'housewife'. The home, long considered women's special domain, reinforces sex-role stereotypes and subtly perpetuates traditional views of family. From the master bedroom to the head of the table, the 'man of the house/breadwinner' is afforded places of authority, privacy (his own study), and leisure (a hobby shop, a special lounge chair). A homemaker has no inviolable space of her own. She is attached to spaces of service. She is a hostess in the living room, a cook in the kitchen, a mother in the children's room, a lover in the bedroom, a chauffeur in the garage. The house is a spatial and temporal metaphor for conventional role playing.

The acceptance and expression of these traditional cultural roles and attitudes still persist in the design, if not the use, of almost all domestic architecture. In being exclusively identified with the home, women are associated with traits of nurturance, cooperation, subjectivity, emotionalism, and fantasy, while 'man's world'—the public world of events and 'meaningful' work—is associated with objectivity, impersonalization, competition, and rationality.

This fragmentation, this segregation of the public and private spheres according to sex roles reinforces an emotionally monolithic stereotype of women and men. It excludes each sex from contact and therefore a fuller understanding of each other. It limits each from learning a variety of skills and reflects on our concepts of self and other. I believe one of the most important responsibilities of architectural feminism is to heal this schizophrenic spatial schism—to find a new architectural language in which the 'words', 'grammar', and 'syntax' synthesize work and play, intellect and feeling, action and compassion.

ENVIRONMENT AS BARRIER

Women's lives are profoundly affected by the design and use of public spaces and buildings, transportation systems, neighborhoods, and housing. Discriminatory laws, governmental regulations, cultural attitudes, informal practices, and lack of awareness by professionals have created conditions which reflect and reinforce women's second-class status.

Women are perceived as having very little to do with public space. In public buildings and spaces both physical and cultural barriers exclude women with children. A woman with a child in a stroller, trying to get through a revolving door or a subway turnstile, is a 'handicapped' person. Public places rarely provide space where infants can be breast-fed or have their diapers changed—the implication being that mothers and children should be at home where they belong.

Public transportation is used by those with the least access to automobiles, namely the young, the aged, minorities, and low-income workers. While men also fall into these categories, almost twice as many women as men rely on public transportation to get to their jobs in the 12 largest metropolitan areas of the country. The location of industries and household work in the suburbs, where there is little,

if any, public transportation, severely influences job possibilities for both urban low-income female heads of household and suburban women without access to cars.

Women of all socioeconomic classes have been victims of extreme discrimination in the rental and purchase of housing and in obtaining mortgage financing and insurance. Section 8, a federally subsidized housing program, disqualifies single persons who are not elderly or disabled as well as people of the same or opposite sex who live together but are not related by blood or marriage. Standards of this type deny equal access to much-needed low-cost housing for the burgeoning numbers of widows and displaced homemakers, many of whom are likely to have limited or low incomes. It also blatantly discriminates according to sexual preference and marital status. Yet in the past 12 years, households of 'primary individuals' (those who live with persons unrelated to them) have grown four times as fast as households of nuclear families. In 1973, 76 per cent of women over the age of 65 who were heads of households lived alone. The increased long-evity of women, combined with undeniable changes in family structure, requires the availability of a wide range of housing types, locations, and prices which respect the diversity of the ageing population and acknowledge varying levels of dependence.

A meaningful environment is necessary and essential to a meaningful existence. Women must demand public buildings and spaces, transportation, and housing, which support our lifestyles and incomes and respond to the realities of our lives, not the cultural fantasies about them.

On New Year's Eve 1971, 75 women took over an abandoned building on Fifth Street owned by the City of New York. They issued the following statement on 29 January:

Because we want to develop our own culture,
Because we want to overcome stereotypes,
Because we refuse to have 'equal rights' in a corrupt society,
Because we want to survive, grow, be ourselves...

We took over a building to put into action
with women those things essential to women
—health care, child care, food conspiracy,
clothing and book exchange, gimme
women's shelter, a lesbian rights center,
interarts center, feminist school, drug
rehabilitation.

We know the city does not provide for us.
Now we know the city will not allow us to provide for ourselves.
For this reason we were busted.
We were busted because we are women acting independently of men, independently
of the system...In other words, we are women being revolutionary.

SPACE AS POWER

The appropriation and use of space are political acts. The kinds of spaces we have, don't have, or are denied access to can empower us or render us powerless. Spaces can enhance or restrict, nurture or impoverish. We must demand the right to architectural settings which will support the essential needs of all women.

The type of spaces demanded by the women involved in the Fifth Street takeover poignantly illustrate those places lacking in our lives. Day-care centers, displaced homemakers' facilities, and women's resource centers are vitally necessary if we are to eliminate existing and potential barriers to employment for all women. Battered women's shelters are essential if we are to provide women and their children with a safe refuge from their abusers and a place to rethink their lives, futures, and the welfare of their children. Emergency housing is needed for women runaways and victims of rape. Halfway houses ought to exist for prostitutes, alcoholics, addicts, and prisoners. Shelters for shopping bag ladies are needed as well. We need decentralized and convenient health care facilities for women. We need to build safe and available abortion clinics. Midwife-run birth centers are crucial if we are to have control over our own bodies and restore our 'birth rights'. These places and spaces represent new architectural settings which reflect both radical changes in our society as well as glaring evidence of women's oppression and disenfranchisement.

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

Women constitute over 50 per cent of the users of our environments, yet we have had a negligible influence on the architectural forms our environments express. Where legislation and funding connected with new spaces for women do exist, it is primarily the result of activism by women, women's movement organizations, and the work of those few but increasing feminists who are in elected or appointed political office. If the future vision for the built and planned environment is to be one in which the totality of women's needs is environmentally supported, then each woman must become her own architect, that is, she must become aware of her ability to exercise environmental judgment and make decisions about the nature of the spaces in which she lives and works. Women must act consciously and politically. We must ask ourselves who will benefit and who will lose in decisions being made about our neighborhoods, homes, and workplaces, and endorse those proposals that make life easier for us and for those groups who have the least.

Be it affirmed:

The built environment is largely the creation of white, masculine subjectivity. It is neither value-free nor inclusively human. Feminism implies that we fully recognize this environmental inadequacy and proceed to think and act out of that recognition.

One of the most important tasks of the women's movement is to make visible the full meaning of our experiences and to reinterpret and restructure the built environment in those terms. We will not create fully supportive, life-enhancing environments until our society values those aspects of human experience that have been devalued through the oppression of women, and we must work with each other to achieve this.

These are feminist concerns which have critical dimensions that are both societal and spatial. They will require feminist activism as well as architectural expertise to insure a solution.