His House, Our House and Her House: A Filmic Place for Women

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Architecture’s Place for Women

The most famous architects in the world are, and have always been, men, although a growing number of women architects are beginning to gain international and public recognition. Architecture, more than some other types of professions, has moved slowly to accommodate its own increasing number of women practitioners (Fowler and Wilson 2004). This is in part because of its link to ‘a specific historical and cultural construction of masculinity and a masculinist vision of professional work’ (Davies 1996: 661) within what remains to be a male-dominated construction industry.

A UK report documenting women’s membership into the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) entitled His House or Our House? (Lowe and Byrne 1993) revealed that while women were increasing in numbers in the construction workplace, they were simultaneously suffering discrimination that inhibited their ability to work happily (CIOB 1995). Funded research by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) entitled Why Do Women Leave Architecture? (De Graft-Johnson et al. 2003) and by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) entitled Parlour: Women, Equality, Architecture (Stead et al. 2014) have exposed continuing acts of professional everyday discrimination against women – and more recently male architects – that has inhibited their career progression. For both genders inflexible workplaces restrict career progress for those who seek work–life models other than the traditional male career path. According to Rochelle Martin (1989: 232), a traditional male career is one where ‘a young man works long hours at the beginning of his career to establish his reputation and gain necessary skills and knowledge. His entire focus is on his career, often to the exclusion of family and personal life. […] A woman with a family is usually not free to follow this pattern and she suffers by seeing herself, as well as being seen, as not quite a “real” architect’. Young male architects who choose to spend less time at work or more with their family are also limited by their perceived professional lack of commitment.

This issue of work–personal life balance underpins discontentment for many women (and some men) architects who struggle with the juggling act – having to operate between multiple personas, trying to adapt to identities that can often require contradictory behaviours. But this is only one aspect of gendered dissatisfaction in the profession. A
Figure 1: Desmond Plummer with a group of school pupils at the West Cross Route site, Wembley, 1967. Image reference no. 248322. © London Metropolitan Archives, City of London.
longstanding glass ceiling culture within the academy and practice has limited and continues to limit women’s progression. What has been valued as excellence in professional work has not taken into consideration differences in gendered life outside the workplace. As more and more women enter architectural education and practice, we are able to transform the discipline at large and importantly its inherited disciplinary practices. I argue here that the space in which women (and men) architects, who want another career model, will flourish is one that only they can generate. Women are better able to make effective changes – if they choose to – because of their historical ‘outsider’ status, and for the purpose of this chapter I focus on methodologies for studying gendered creativity of women architectural thinkers. Unlike His House or Our House – a converted version of His House – a ‘third space’ (Grosz 2001: xv) of practice or what I term Her House remains to be explored. It is a space in which women’s creative voice can establish possible new modes of pedagogical and professional practice that are not normally deemed conventional and which theorize women’s experience in architecture and construction.

Creating Other Forms of Professional Architectural Voice

While a definition of profession is hard to define, Rannveig Dahle states that:

professions are knowledge-based, [where] the management of such knowledge is ruled by codes of ethics, and autonomy is regarded as a core criterion [...] Brante (2011) argues vigorously against a broadening of the definition and advocates a universal definition [...]. Professions, he argues, are socially and politically significant parts of contextually conditioned truth regimes.

(2012: 311)

Architecture has strict codes of ethics on what constitutes valid professional discourse. Through a lengthy education (typically eight or more years), architects learn appropriate behaviours and discourses whose standards have been historically set by the aspirations of male architects. But professional standards in architecture and in the academy are beginning to be rethought in response to feminist thinkers wanting to go beyond the existing limits (Petrescu 2007; Brown 2011).

According to Helene Cixous (in Cixous et al. 1976: 875), ‘[w]oman must write her self; must write about women and bring women to writing. [...] Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own involvement’. I do not believe the optimal space of practice for all women architects and thinkers can be found within the established discipline but instead see that is might emerge within an interdisciplinary space. An interdisciplinary ‘third space’ is a ‘space in which to interact without hierarchy, a space of position outside both, a place that doesn’t yet exist’ (Grosz 2001: xv). A ‘third space’ is detached from the mainstreams of both disciplines but exists at the peripheries or boundaries of each. For Grosz (2001: xvii) to operate outside and inside a discipline, such as architecture, is to be in a position of highly positive potentiality, where ‘the outside of one field is the inside of another’.
Since 2004, the interdisciplinary ‘third space’ between architecture writing and film has become a site for my own creative architectural practice. Within it lies a space of activism, my personal campaign to define other places for women’s theoretical practice. My research practice traverses documentary making, creative writing and short filmmaking. The journey is neither lineal nor is it always concerned with the subject matter of women, since I have written and made documentaries and short films about women and men architects, famous, successful or marginalized. Instead, the social relations between women and women, between women and men and between men and men and their link to the formation and destruction of institutional canons are a fundamental line of enquiry that pervades my research. Themes of institutional socialization underpin much of my research because I consider that it is through established professional and personal social structures that women, more so than men, architects are disadvantaged and dis-enabled.

Here I discuss two of my films produced through my production company, Caryatid Films. The first is Illegal Architect (Dir. Troiani 2014), a sci-fi short that shows the frustration of a woman architect who fails to comply with professional standards. The second film entitled A Day in the Life of Sara Murray (Dir. Troiani 2015) is a documentary about a successful woman Building Contractor in the United Kingdom. Through an explanation of the motive for each film – to make visual women’s professional life experiences – I aim to discuss how ‘undisciplinarity’ (Marshall and Bleecker 2010) can facilitate new methodologies and practices of research.

By operating between architecture writing and filmmaking, both my films create new sites of feminist discourse disseminated in a cinematic rather than written format. Both are broadly video essays or ‘essay films’ (Corrigan 2011) that use a documentary mode. Framed by what it means ‘to assay’, the ‘essay film’ is a form of creative filmmaking used and defined firstly by Hans Richter (1940 [1992]: 195–98) and described in his essay, ‘The film essay: A new form of documentary film’. According to Nora M. Alter (2003: 14), Richter’s essay film ‘allows the filmmaker to transgress the rules and parameters of the traditional documentary practice, granting the imagination with all its artistic potentiality free reign’. The essay film transgresses disciplinary boundaries. Alter (2007: 44–45) writes, ‘[p]ositioned […] between genres that are more stable and firmly established – in the case of the written essay between literature and philosophy and in the case of the essay film between narrative fiction and documentary – audio-visual essays problematize binary categories of representation’.

An Illegal Architect

Illegal Architect (Troiani 2014) is a tongue-in-cheek dystopian animated fiction set in London in 2184, 200 years after Nineteen Eighty-Four (Radford 1984). It is the story of Kester, an architect who has been summoned to a meeting at the Headquarters of the Ministry of Urban Judgement to discuss whether one of the tower designs Kester has produced has been approved. The RIBA Headquarters was used as the location for the shoot because it is a building designed to symbolize the institution of architecture and its aspiration for gender equality, which is represented by the female column and male column at its entrance (Hill 1998: 52).

The film begins with a sombre vision of London under surveillance. It is a symbolic image representing the heavy weight of institutional policing that architectural practitioners,
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academics and students negotiate and operate within almost daily. London is grey, morbid, disheartening. Warfare fills the sky. Zeppelins commissioned by the Ministry of Urban Judgement survey the streets in search of dissidents. To make life even more restrictive, the Ministry has removed the earth's atmosphere so that all denizens have to wear an atmospheric survival suit.

Because of the suit, Kester manoeuvres with difficulty through the revolving doors of the Headquarters of the Ministry, surveys the room and then is led by a digital text ribbon to the meeting room. The meeting is with Civil Servant 70 (or CS70), someone Kester studied architecture with. CS70 took the safe bureaucratic route; Kester chose the path of architectural designer: the creative professional who is always waiting for approval in order to make career progress. They shake hands and greet one another. CS70 invites Kester to take off the heads-up display. It is only then we see Kester is a woman.

After the pleasantries, the two discuss the application. As they do so, Kester’s design for a sanctuary tower hovers as a hologram over the desk. After chiding Kester for her constant inability to conform – to work with the system – CS70 rejects her application. Frustrated Kester contests CS70’s authority to judge her work. On the way she quotes Friedrich Nietzsche’s 1886 treatise Beyond Good and Evil. Exasperated Kester decides she has had enough of the disrespect for her work and removes the restrictive atmospheric suit, piece by piece, an act of defiance. As she undresses, Kester complains about how women architects always need to assimilate to the standards of male architects and of her tiredness with that situation. Liberated, dressed only in her undergarments, she stands bare and exposed but relieved.

Having been pushed to her limit, Kester decides the world is better off without her arch-nemesis, hurling a drawing compass at him. As he lies face down on his oversized timber desk, Kester recalls Étienne de La Boétie’s (1548 [1997]: 53) manifesto against tyranny, The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude:

Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed. I do not ask that you place hands upon the tyrant to topple him over, but simply that you support him no longer; then you will behold him, like a great Colossus whose pedestal has been pulled away, fall of his own weight and break into pieces.

A Day in the Life of Sara Murray

In stark contrast to the fantasy fiction of Illegal Architect, A Day in the Life of Sara Murray (Dir. Troiani 2015) is a documentary record of a day in the working life of 48-year-old managing director of the UK building contractor, Benfield & Loxley, Sara Murray. Trained as a quantity surveyor (QS) in 1984, Murray (2009: 9) ‘rose from a position of trainee to director in charge of a business unit (the first ever woman in that position for a company that has a 160 year history)’. Murray moved into building contracting in 2008 through invitation by her co-director Graham Varney who was impressed by her skills and strong performance in project management. The shift, later in her career, did not occur through a slow rise in the office hierarchy as is typically the case for a tradesperson. Instead she moved sideways. With that shift came new workplace challenges based on her entering at a senior management rather than a junior level, a change that led her to research
women executives in the construction industry and presented in her unpublished MBA dissertation entitled ‘Why are there so few women in executive roles in the construction industry’ (Murray 2009). The dissertation includes personal reflections on Murray’s ‘discomfort at attending male dominated board meetings where all [her] fellow directors were very ambitious and typically aggressive despite [her] obvious success in managing a business unit’. In response to an unwelcoming work environment, Murray (2009: 72) used her MBA research ‘to make sense of [her] feelings and to put them in perspective’.

My research on Murray is based on interview conversations with her before and during the one-day film shoot. On Wednesday 18 June 2014, I followed Murray from 6 a.m. until her return home at 7 p.m. with a film crew. Murray was recorded in the everyday spaces that she normally occupies, chronologically on the day: the gymnasium she is a member of, her Benfield & Loxley office that she shares with Varney, the boardrooms of her clients, on site and in her home gymnasium. The day was a typical day in Murray’s diary, chosen because of the breadth of co-workers that she would meet. Murray’s testimony and the testimonies of people with whom she works - Varney, her purchaser, clients, site agents and tradesmen - was fundamental to the study because they record Murray’s experience of working in the construction industry as a woman. The day was scripted only in the order of her prearranged appointments.

While Murray would never claim to be a feminist, she actively supports the inclusion of women in the construction projects in which she works by appointing women in traditionally male roles. The women form a mentor-network, having worked with one another in the past. Murray challenges adversarial, aggressive and sexist behaviour on the construction site and in the office and works to reform workplace practice to improve standards for men and women working on site in a peaceful, non-combative way. Married but without children, Murray presents a highly professional image in the office and on site.

Murray’s bodily image – feminine, not corporate, unassuming frame, non-class distinct accent, reserved but friendly disciplined demeanour, focused, strong-mindedness – complicates the conventional image of a building contractor. Murray does not encounter conflict, in part because when conflict does arise within and outside Benfield & Loxley, she is quick and effective at resolving issues. The respect she gives her staff and colleagues – shown by her regard for site safety and cleanliness, intolerance of macho behaviour on site (in terms of language etc.), efficient and fair work practices – has resulted in respect being reciprocated by her predominantly male work colleagues at all levels. She is recognized as having authority. She appoints staff in positions of leadership who support a non-macho site environment. Through Murray (and Varney), young men in their company are changing their attitude to working with women in the industry. Murray has shown that on the construction site both male and female staff respect her for her hard-working ethic and honest, disciplined, no games-approach to work. She does not ask to be treated differently because she is a woman. Conversely, she does not play down her femininity – on site or in the boardroom, she is simply a woman of few words.

Murray has the capacity to enhance the number of women in her firm at the top through the appointment of a female co-director. Still, when questioned about this Murray admitted that she would prefer to work with a male director, as the male–female director relationship
is one she is more comfortable with. At the time, Murray did not know of any other woman she would want to join her as a managing director of Benfield & Loxley. She was clear that her thoughts on this do not preclude this happening. Still, it reiterates the fact that women who gain positions of power, regardless of their success, sometimes cannot imagine models of management that are predominantly female or without male authority included. While workplaces are changing in their gender balance, women need to consciously resist reiterating established social norms in construction work that they have inherited. This is difficult because acculturation of sex difference happens from childhood as a social construction. But with time, as more and more women enter the workplace, established norms are being challenged. On the way, women and men have to negotiate their gender performativity.

**His House, Our House or Her House**

In 'Zaha: An image of “The woman architect”', I set out the complex terrain in-between femininity and masculinity that one high-profile woman architect had to negotiate. Shifting between stereotypical expectations of feminine and masculine behaviours is a sociological condition that many women architects experience working in predominantly male workforces. It involves women mimicking the traits and behaviours of men, or not, as required to operate effectively in their work environment in order to gain capital (Bourdieu 1983 [1986]) to succeed.

Even women without children, here Hadid, Kester and Murray, can sometimes encounter greater difficulty than men in workplace environments because they are perpetually in a state of integration and negotiation within a dominant traditional male model of work. The situation is complicated further for women (and men) who have children or people to care for because they are further compromised between their enactments of gender behaviours (Butler 1988, 1990). On the matter of the way in which working women manage their work and personal lives, sociologists Margaret M. Poloma and T. Neal Garland recall in 'The married professional woman: A study in the tolerance of domestication': in the words of de Beauvoir (1953: 662): ‘Desire for a feminine destiny – husband, home, and children – and the enchantment of love are not always easy to reconcile with the will to succeed’. The research on high-status, professional women by Poloma and Garland (1971: 538) shows a tolerance by working professionals for ‘domestication in order to mesh the roles of career woman with marriage and a family’.

To their surprise, Poloma and Garland (1971: 538) found that women in the study from all age groups – 25 to 30 or from 50 and over - did not object to this, noting ‘they expressed great satisfaction in being able to combine marriage and a career, with the family role as the salient one and the professional role as supportive in the role hierarchy’. Their explanations for this, regardless of feminism, is the different ‘socialization process between men and women, a long-standing tradition of unequal opportunities for women, the psychological process of cognitive dissonance, as well as a genuine liking for the situation the way it is’. Traditionally, men have been raised from childhood to be more self-confident than women and it is because some women, who have low confidence, do not tend to challenge the norms associated with their work and home lives (Ely and Padavic 2007: 1125).
ARCHITECTURE FILMMAKING

My architecture filmmaking practice endeavours to challenge what constitutes valid subject matter of discourse in architecture and acceptable forms of academic publication. It aims to open up other modes of constructing architectural theory that offer promise for expanding ‘writing practices’ for women’s experience and understandings of architectural labour. A form of what I have formerly described as ‘corporeal publication’ (Troiani and Kahn 2016), architecture filmmaking uses video as a spatial medium and ‘visuality’ as a research tool (Rose 2012) to impact and benefit women’s scholarship. It is this visual ethnographic space that I am particularly interested in operating within. In Virginia Woolf’s essay ‘The cinema’ she notes the vast capacity of cinema to articulate emotion through the making of images not solely words. Woolf writes:

It seems plain that the cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions have so far to find expression. [...] If so much of our thinking and feeling is connected with seeing, some residue of visual emotion which is of no use either to painter or poet may await the cinema [...]. When some new symbol for expressing thought is found, the film-maker has enormous riches at his [or her] command.

(1950 [1926]: 169–70)

The two video essays presented here examine professional hopelessness and hopefulness related to women’s career progression. They use a visual emotional register to show the workplace terrain that some women negotiate daily. Only by exploring architecture film writing will it be possible to determine the real capacity to produce truly ‘undisciplinary’ work so as to mobilize alternative institutional and feminist critiques about architectural production. Using such unconventional methods, women researchers are provided new avenues to represent the professional landscapes of everyday working life. Rather than make private these very personal and emotional experiences of women and men working on a treadmill struggling with the possibility of never breaking the glass ceiling, ‘undisciplinary’ research practice ‘offers new ways of fixing the problems that old disciplinary and extra-disciplinary practices created in the first place’ (Marshall and Bleecker 2010: 219). In order to challenge the predominantly ‘pale and male’ modes of practice in which women are currently working, it is essential we work collectively as women towards locating new creative ways so as to better serve the needs of working women and men who do not want to work using the traditional male model of professional practice. We need to understand that career ‘pinch points’ are connected with enablement and opportunity provided by empathetic colleagues with whom we work.

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ARCHITECTURE FILMMAKING


**Filmography**

