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Feminist practices: interdisciplinary approaches to women in architecture

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BOOK REVIEW

Feminist practices: interdisciplinary approaches to women in architecture, edited by Lori A. Brown, 2011, Surrey and Burlington, Ashgate, 378 pp., \$65 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4094-2117-7

Feminist Practices originates from a traveling exhibition and series of public talks with the same name that took place in 2008 and 2009. As the title suggests, the book presents feminist practices and methodologies in architecture. While doing that, however, we are urged to think outside the box. Firstly, ‘feminist’ in feminist practices is not necessarily ‘female focused’ or ‘gender specific’. Rather, it refers to alternative modes of seeing, researching and practicing. Secondly, architecture is also approached critically, opposing the star system, engaging the client and the community, and challenging usual hierarchies: visual/material, permanent/transient, public/private, labored/expedient, and precious/valueless (325). In return, feminist practices in architecture refers to explorations on all alternative modes of pedagogy, research and practice that establish new ways of understanding spatial relationships, revise existing power relations and offer possibilities for new interactions and value systems. This is a huge task, but a worthy one. However, there is one problem with the title that needs to be recognized.

All the contributors are women. Brown recognizes this as a problem as well but presents the existing gender disparity in architecture schools and practice as the main reason for her decision. It is hard to be convinced with this justification, since it reduces feminist practices to authorship, while trying not to limit it to gender-specific explorations. The contradiction inherent in such a claim requires a revision in the title, changing it from ‘interdisciplinary approaches *to* women in architecture’ to ‘interdisciplinary approaches *by* women in architecture’. This small change in the title would have saved readers from any possible confusion.

The book brings together 19 articles, organized by way of an introduction and four parts. It opens with Brown’s introductory essay and continues with Rendell’s impressive *Critical Spatial Practices*. In this article, Rendell places ‘some markers’ as she promises and explains what is meant by ‘a critical feminist alternative to conventional architectural practice’ (18). The last of the opening articles is *Inventing Feminist Practices* by Stratigakos, in which she gives us an insight into the stories not only of women architects in Berlin at the turn of the century, but also of all career women at that specific time and place; their needs, expectations, actions, which transformed the built environment and the practice.

In *Part I: Feminist Practices in Design*, five articles present creative research in architecture that bring together art, architecture, philosophy and history. In *Breathing Spaces*, Hammond describes her installation with the same name and gives a good example of an ‘artist-researcher’ or a ‘research creator’. In *Blazing Inter Alia*, Preston remaps an actual journey through a series of eight collages and searches for an alternative system of representation by drawing from the works of Braidotti, Solnit and Du Plessis. Leski approaches a design problem through story telling in *Sisters*. Wenthal questions gender-specific constructs

of architect, interior designer, tailor and seamstress in her three projects in *Interior-scapes*, whereas Chee critiques both the masking of subjectivity and the priority given to the architect in the architectural historiography in *Materializing the Tiger in the Archive* and produces a series of models that bring forth the metaphorical, the anecdotal and the subjective in architectural research.

Essays in *Part II: Feminist Practices in Pedagogy* exemplify creative approaches to teaching architecture. The articles take us on a tour from a collaborative architecture and dance education course in Eisenbach and Krefting's *The Pedagogy and Practice of 'Placing Space'* to a design-built studio in Brazil, which uses Capoeira Angola as a way to understand/interpret a place and its culture in Walsh's *Axis Mundi Brazil Studio* and finally to a workshop in Taipei and a studio in Seoul in McGrath's *Fishing for Ghosts* in which she investigates the intangible in architecture. These studios offer interdisciplinary and intercultural ways to understand, design and interpret architecture written large. They are very inspirational for any design studio instructor.

Part III: Feminist Practices in Design Research brings together four articles, which can be further grouped into two. The first two articles, Erkarlan's *Gender Roles at the Intersection of Public and Private Spheres* and Arya's *Courtyards* trace the interrelations between gender roles and urban morphology in non-western contexts – Turkey in Erkarlan's case, and India in Arya's case. Brown's *Politicizing the Female Body* is an exploration on 'the relationships between space and the issue of abolition' (277). Her use of mapping techniques is effective in communicating this relationship, making apparent what is already there; however, it leaves us wondering about how to take the next step, especially in terms of how can architecture move 'out beyond itself and engage a much larger and contested terrain' (291). Similarly, Steele's *Home Grown* takes our attention to industrial agriculture, food, pollution and eco system rehabilitation, but leaves us questioning how everything ties back either to architecture or to feminism. And yet, maybe that is the point.

The last section, *Part IV: Feminist Practices in Communities* includes accounts of one installation and two design projects. McGaw's *Urban Threads* is an impressive article that accomplishes two things at once: First, it gives a sincere account of her installation work *Urban Threads*, what was imagined, what was encountered and what was realized, which in itself is enough to exemplify what is/could be a feminist practice. Then she supports this account with a critical dialog on the possibilities of a feminist practice in architecture via the works of Rendell, Bloomer, Grosz and Buck-Morss. This article can easily find its place in a reading list on feminist practices. The other two projects, Fior and Clarke's *Barking Town Square* in London and Brunzema's *La Marqueta Mile* in East Harlem, New York, are both designed and realized with the designers collaborating with their respective communities, questioning 'what it takes to make a space that will endure once the architect leaves the site' (333) and how architecture (not the architects) can help 'empower the larger community' (365).

Feminist Practices accomplishes what it sets out to accomplish: defining feminist practices as alternative modes of pedagogy, research and practice and architecture as an interdisciplinary field of explorations about people, places and their interactions. Even though it is hard to tell how much these alternative modes will find their place in the 'native' grounds, the works collected in this volume give us hope of being able to alter the status quo.

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