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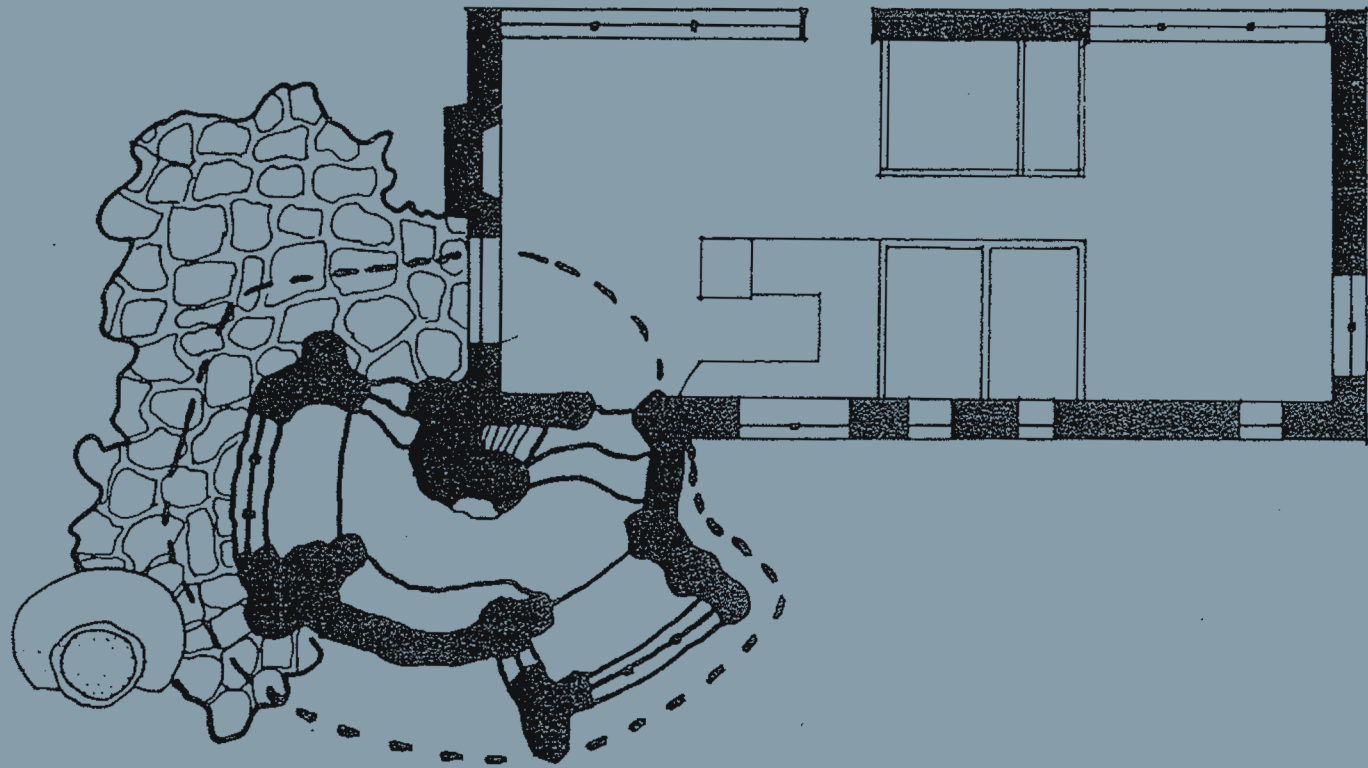
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Designing between binaries

We must dismantle preconceived divides between the rational and the emotional to develop richer, more pluralistic practices, writes *Ruth Lang*



There is a long-asserted divide between the sexes, establishing binary distinctions that perpetually set us in opposition; men are from Mars and women are from Venus. Logic is attributed to men, emotional intuition to women. Strength is associated with masculinity, softness with femininity. Men have scientific minds, whereas women are more artistically minded. By this framework, surely architecture – so famously the blend of both arts and science – would be an exemplar of a hybrid position, a trans-ness of design? Yet still, patriarchal prerogatives pervade the profession in the way in which architecture is taught, practised, constructed and experienced, which has led to a suppression of creativity from those who do not feel they conform to the archetype of ‘the architect’. As our historic awards system attests, for many decades we’ve been indoctrinated to celebrate the heroically strident gesture, the bold dominion over the tabula rasa, rather than the more subtle processes of listening, care and repair which might otherwise thrive in an alternative approach, one which has hitherto been ascribed as ‘feminine’.

The argument for gender equality in architecture often pivots around key themes, such as the idea that the lack of women in the profession means we miss out on the perspectives they bring; the softer, more humane considerations, and even the greater consideration for access for pushchairs, or spaces to deter sexual assault, or more public toilets. But this in itself is perpetuating the divide, asserting that there are differences in the way we think and act according to our gendered view. In many ways, pigeonholing these traits gives a free pass for others to not employ them, as it is another’s work, not their own.

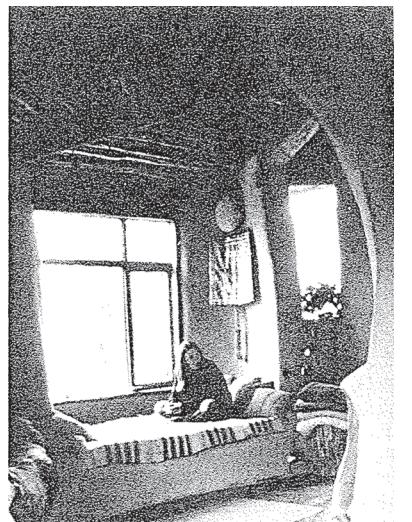
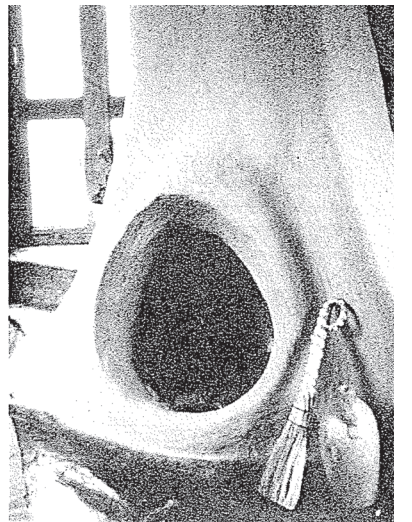
The idea that women are emotional or artistic, whereas men are logical and scientific, stems in part – as the historian David Noble points out – from western scientific research in the late medieval period, which developed within the confines of clerical culture, and was therefore founded in institutions that excluded women. Thus this split is not a biological one, but an administrative consequence, borne of archaic prejudice. The separation of male and female, art and science, evokes the original ‘Two Cultures’ split which Baron CP Snow famously despaired at in his 1959 Rede lecture. Snow – a pluralist himself, being a physical scientist, a novelist, and a parliamentary secretary – railed that ‘the intellectual life of the whole of western society’ had become split into the ‘two cultures’ of science and humanities, and that this division was a major handicap to both in solving the world’s problems. Snow recognised that there was a necessary overlap between these perspectives, positing

a ‘mediating third culture’ within which these two narrowly defined disciplines could learn and evolve symbiotically. In much the same manner, asserting the binary construct of male versus female is destructive to the demographics of the profession, as it immediately presents barriers to those who do not identify with these delineated identities to participate, since their non-conforming contribution (and lived experience) is perpetually situated as ‘outsider’. Often, such identities are erased by an education system that can’t nurture or even accommodate them due to the rigidity of its expectations. Learning from Snow, we would benefit from redefining a more pluralistic territory for architecture to enable all practitioners to thrive – not as a tertiary territory alongside or subsidiary to the existing framework, but as the territory itself. To do so requires us to be more than ‘gender blind’, but to actively develop strategies for inclusive spatial justice.

In seeking to disassemble the oppositional gender paradigm within which architecture has been framed, Jane Rendell has explored the historical association of men with the city and women with the home – an association that subsequently privileges whose perspectives are valued in their design. Through the examination of the *dérive* in early 19th-century London, Rendell reveals a previously more fluid consideration of gender and space, which has since been usurped. Gender is, after all, a social construct, just as the frameworks that guide contemporary spatial design have been constructed in an aggregational manner, which reflects the social structures of our past. In perpetuating these hierarchical myths surrounding the differences between the genders, we are thereby constructing further divisions that privilege the status quo. These divides exist not only in our perceptions and in the words we use, but in the standards, precedents, and legislation that frame how spaces are designed. This is how the conventionality of cis, hetero, white, ableist space is repeatedly reinforced, forming an almost impermeable barrier to alternative modes of architectural creativity. Even within the planning process, the call for conformity and ‘in-keepingness’ hampers any proposed deviation from the spatial and aesthetic frameworks of our patriarchal past. The feminist practices Matrix and Edit in particular have done much work that clearly illustrates the negative societal impact of these space-gender relations, which can enable us to now take this research even further, and to seek to accommodate other forms of living, reflective of the needs of space for shelter, protection, joy, and inhabitation for all those who do not conform to the hierarchies of nuclear heteronormativity.

There is a richness of experience and

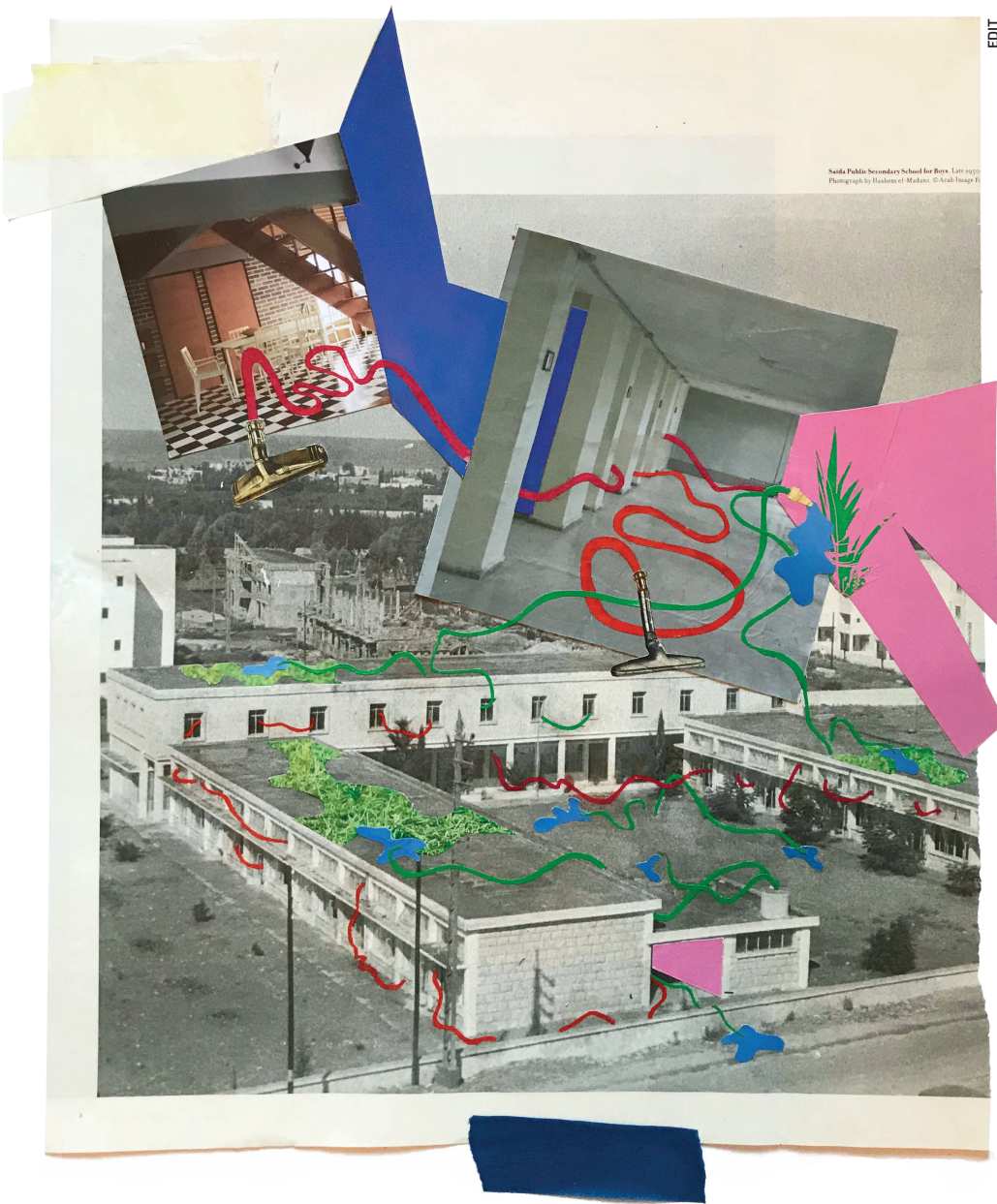
Through the 1970s and 1980s, Noel Phyllis Birkby and Leslie Kanes Weisman developed and taught feminist architectural practices, encouraging female students and practitioners to make drawings that expressed the fantasies, hopes and frustrations they held in a world designed by men. The products (this spread) are both dream-like and desirous, breaking from rigid conventions of architectural form



culture which has previously been oppressed, marginalised, and actively erased. To overcome this deeply ingrained and historic injustice, and to welcome such benefits into the fold, we must heed Francesca Hughes’ rallying cry ‘to reverse the structure that underpins discrimination in order to fully displace a hierarchy’. Yet this requires acknowledgement that such inequality exists, and work to be undertaken to dismantle such hierarchies. Currently, the burden lies on those who have previously been excluded to reassert their validity within the canon of the institution. Such work demands not only the creativity of what is considered an ‘unconventional’ approach to spatial design and tectonic expression, but also the relentless pushback against the hierarchical system that fights to exclude it. As Audre Lorde reminds us, ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’: we need to find new ways of working and thinking, which collaboratively challenge the inherent inequalities present in our profession. Such work is even more imperative if we benefit from those inequalities, or feel unaware of the negative impact of their existence – unawareness just means we have not looked deep enough yet.

To build a more pluralistic future, which can be infused with these previously excluded, more fluid considerations of space, expression, and alternative forms of occupation and experience, we must appreciate the blinkered nature of our past, and the bearing this still has on our present. Yet rather than trying to establish new delineations between male and female perspectives, use this to instead develop an alternative, queer, non-binary practice – one which is more accepting of the different permutations of qualities we each bring to the profession, and the plurality of expression and forms of living and working that this entails. This is a feminist approach, which seeks not to assert equality for the value of these excluded perspectives and experiences, but to demolish this binary distinction of their peripheralisation, and to establish a richer, more pluralistic territory within which spatial justice can be achieved for the profession. This trans(cendent) architecture might finally enable us to break free of the patriarchal operational system that currently defines the parameters of acceptance within the profession, and the stereotypical expectations based on our sex, sexuality or gender. Acknowledging these realities rather than denying them, while also accepting their constant fluidity, can open up new forms of creativity which more truly reflect the myriad experiences and perspectives that constitute our society. In doing so, we might all both exercise and benefit from the practice of care, empathy, and joyous expression unleashed within the profession as a result.

Edit is a feminist design collective focused on how enduring bias is embedded into the built environment. Their 2020 project *Home Revolution* (below) created learning materials for children being taught at home during Covid-19 lockdowns, encouraging them to think about how the spaces of their home shape the way they live. New ways of working will be required to build a more pluralistic future for architectural practice: ambiguous in their gendered presentations, participants in Augusto Boal’s workshop *Theatre of the Oppressed* (opposite) form a structure for collective support



EDIT



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