

## **Revealing Work**

### **Interrogating artefacts to (re)view histories of feminist architectural practice**

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### **Introduction**

Contemporary investigations of feminist practices in architecture from the near past rely upon scant and therefore precious sources. Many unique physical artefacts are lying, unarchived, in box files and plan chests or fading on bookshelves, and their meanings and associations remain caught in the era in which they were made. We have selected artefacts from 1970s and 80s feminist spatial practice in London that we, with others, were instrumental in creating, to re-examine, and to invite further commentaries. Through contextualising them in their period - and interrogating through our own memories - we became particularly concerned to reappraise what counts as *work*; the work of actual doing; the work of finding ways to generate social change; the experiences of that work as embodied; and the work that the artefact itself does - how, through what happens to it in the world, it exceeds or alters what had been intended.

### **Feminist objects and architecture**

Academics and curators Bartlett and Henderson have usefully attempted to define what constitutes a 'feminist object' within the context of the contemporary museum<sup>1</sup>. Here objects and their display have been increasingly used to illustrate differences in social perspectives and memories, and particularly to make visible previously marginalised and ignored groups. For Bartlett and Henderson, feminist objects are “objects made by

activists associated with the women's movement for feminist purposes".<sup>2</sup> For them, such objects sit outside of, and are a radical challenge to, normative society:

*feminist objects operate in an entirely different economy of remaking, transforming, and re-versing capitalist production in the service of political agency: feminist things are intrinsically activist things made to make feminist things happen.*<sup>3</sup>

In this argument, feminist objects bear witness to alternative social memories and histories by expressing a refusal of capitalist and patriarchal modes of production and consumption. During the period of "second-wave feminist activism from the 1970s into the early 1990s"<sup>4</sup> feminist activism often operated through just such informal, transitory and immediate means. These predominantly produced artefacts that were hand-made, had a craft aesthetic, and were thus often deliberately oppositional to both the appearance and manufacturing processes of mass-produced consumer products. As they note, this has also affected what has been recorded, and how; what traces remain and where.

Architecture is not always amenable to such directly oppositional forms of representation or process. Whilst there were, and are, similar opportunities for craft-based and anti-consumerist production within feminist architectural practices, all architectural design – however radical - is inherently caught up in the capitalist processes and the complex social and spatial relationships, often normative, which enable the delivery of new buildings. While some artefacts arising from feminist spatial practice might share the same characteristics as Bartlett and Henderson's feminist objects, others must be seen differently, as implicated in processes of production for different and usually multiple and conflicting clients/users and audiences.

All buildings, including the heritage of buildings designed by Matrix (and by feminists involved in that period through their ongoing work such as at Anne Thorne Architects) are on a very different scale to the artefacts we have looked at for this paper. Although malleable to changes in use and interpretation, buildings are of a massive scale,

incredibly complex and relatively permanent. Our exploration of the nature of the feminist architectural artefact is carried out within the context of an understanding of buildings and their inhabitants as acting over time, with the complex temporal effects of and on its very materiality being its mode of action. For us, it remains open as to whether this mode of action can be seen as a kind of ‘activism’ in the way Bartlett and Henderson understand it.

Feminist engagements with the selection, preservation and meaning of artefacts generated by women’s movements are centrally about making visible what is all too often left out of the archive and out of normative histories. The analysis of the objects we have selected was initially prompted by their absence from the architectural archive, and it therefore raises questions about what this archive consists of. The architectural archive conventionally contains (inhabited) buildings and ruins set within (inhabited, contested) cities and landscapes. The archive might further hold documentation of their production, occupation and interpretation, the production of the professions that design and make them, the processes through which buildings and spaces become adapted, transformed, decayed or demolished and the cultural, technical and scientific artefacts that are associated with their existence. Artefactual traces of feminist practice can be – and should – be found in all sections of such an archive.

### **Interrogation**

In analysing the artefacts whose choice, in part, stems from our different roles in Matrix (Julia as architect and Jos as researcher/writer), we are working within a feminist oral history tradition. This recognises – and values – a subjective connection to our material, informed by Sangster’s argument that:

*asking why and how women explain, rationalise and make sense of their past offers insight into the social and material framework within which they operated, the perceived choices and cultural patterns they faced, and the complex relationship between individual consciousness and culture.<sup>5</sup>*

We are directly implicated, as creators and activists, with a particular interest in interrogating the artefacts themselves, and our (and others') interactions with them.

Many authors have examined how architectural education and practice tends to make selections from only specific parts of its archive. For example as Stead and Freeman write:

*buildings have been approached in terms of their patrons, clients, architectural authors, and design concepts before and during construction, more than their expanded social life (or afterlife) beyond practical completion.*<sup>6</sup>

The potentially huge archive noted above is thus contained to a limited array of acceptable sources. Most crucially, architectural design and production is separated off from its 'post-occupancy' consumption; when judging what is a good building and why, a limited set of criteria is applied which do not address the multiple and various effects of intersecting social, spatial and material practices. We found that (almost unintentionally) our object choices blurred such conventional boundaries between production and occupation, and between acts of designing and inhabiting. The selected items – a book, blueprints, a poster, and a film – each define moments in relationships *between* designing, debating, interpreting and occupying built space. They indicate the variety of feminist architectural practice in that period, including that of Matrix, and the potential for creating an archive that reflects the diversity of feminist strategies within architecture. By selecting objects rarely subjected to architectural analysis, we want to both illustrate and interrogate what is distinctive about feminist activism in architecture.

The artefacts we consider are a copy of the Matrix book *Making Space: Women and the Man-Made Environment* (Pluto Press 1984) (Figs. 1 & 2); working drawings for an unbuilt Matrix project (1987) (Figs. 3 & 4); a poster for an event entitled "Women's Realm" (1987) (Figs. 5 & 6); and an excerpt from a Channel 4 TV programme *Paradise Circus* (1988) which explored the place of women in the city (Figs. 7 & 8). Each artefact

is described through factual description, personal recounting, and critical revisiting. This deliberately combines individual oral history with the analysis of each particular item based on our academic and practitioner expertise, not just for the personal memories it enables, or the moment it represents, but crucially for the kinds of work – the doing – that can be identified. Following the artefact descriptions and images, there is a shared commentary, outlining the threads we have begun to draw out through these individual interrogations.

Figure 1

Artefact 1: Worn library copy of Matrix book *Making Space: Women and the Man-Made Environment*

Pluto Press; available for loan from Bartlett School of Architecture Library November 2016. 15 x 21 centimetres. 148 pages. Paper, spine mended with sellotape. (1984)

image: Jos Boys

Figure 2

Artefact 1: The Matrix Book: interrogation by Jos Boys

Figure 3

Artefact 2: Working Drawings

A part set of working drawings of The Calthope Project by Matrix Feminist Architectural Co-operative. A3 drawings, ink on tracing, A3 photocopies. (1987)

image: Julia Dwyer

Figure 4

Artefact 2: Working Drawings: interrogation by Julia Dwyer

Figure 5

Artefact 3: Women's Realm poster

Poster for Women's Realm, an event organised by the Feminist Architects Network, sponsored by Polytechnic of North London and Greater London Council (Jan 31-Feb 1 1987). A2 offset litho two colour print

image: Julia Dwyer

Figure 6

Artefact 3: Women's Realm poster: interrogation by Julia Dwyer

Figure 7

Artefact 4: Selected Excerpt from *Paradise Circus*

Film made for Channel 4 by Heather Powell, Birmingham Film and Video Workshop (BFVW) 1988

image: Jos Boys

Figure 8

Artefact 4: *Paradise Circus*: interrogation by Jos Boys

### **Commentary: how artefacts reveal work**

Through our interrogations of, and conversations about, the selected artefacts, we became increasingly unsure about framing them as objects that primarily *represent* particular social practices (in a specific time and place), whether conventional or radical. Instead we found ourselves interrogating the artefacts as mechanisms for translating something - ideas, questions, beliefs - into a material result, whether a building, an event or a book. Whilst undoubtedly concrete and material, these artefacts are perhaps best investigated as moments made solid within longer complex processes. This meant paying attention to processes of doing, i.e. the underlying work and the time that it takes to generate an object, and the effects that it has through time, beyond its immediate life. We look first at the work of actual doing, and of the experiences of that work as embodied by the individuals involved; and then at the work the artefact itself does - how, through what happens to it in the world, it exceeds or alters what had been.

#### ***A. Feminist architecture as doing***

In conversation, Jos described the type of work involved in producing the *Matrix* book as *slow* and *interstitial*, motivated by a kind of shared curiosity, expressed through many informal – sometimes widely spaced, sometimes intensive - meetings spanning five years from initial discussions to final printing and production. A key memory is sitting together in a garden, and the difficulties in trying to have a way of even talking about, let alone making sense of, a feminist critique of architecture. In this it could be seen as a typical example of both women's work and feminist activism in this period, with participants fitting such work in and around other commitments, blurring normative definitions of what 'proper' work was (paid, status-linked), and its assumed separation from 'hobbies', 'leisure' or the reproductive work of domestic life. This is the ongoing, typical work of creating, developing and producing feminist artefacts that many readers will recognize;

work that fits around work. It is also a form of intellectual labour based on what Sara Ahmed calls ‘sweaty concepts’:

*A sweaty concept might come out of a bodily experience that is trying. The task is to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty. (...) Not eliminating the effort or labour becomes an (...) aim because we have been taught to tidy up our texts, not to reveal the struggle we have in getting somewhere.<sup>7</sup>*

In such ‘tidying up’ of many years effort into a single book, such work can cease to be acknowledged. In our artefact descriptions we have attempted to quantify the amount of actual work embedded in each piece. This is also about work-through-time-and-life, about what *counts* as work in wider society, and about how women together negotiated their understanding of this in and around their specific situations. Julia’s description of working drawings highlights the *obsessiveness* of work common to both activism and architectural practice. The (over) production of drawings for a design, with the associated long hours as deadlines approach, is inculcated through architectural education and inbuilt into the culture of practice. It is an attitude to work that Matrix replicated, which overlapped with typical patterns of activism: intensive commitment (unrelated to wages) to frustration, burnout and back again. Julia noted the negotiations of working hours which were assumed to be valid: negotiation due to childcare commitments was based on the special and important needs of individual women, rather than through explicit debate about work, wellbeing and health for everyone. When negotiations occurred around sticking to fixed hours, it was the architectural workers who without exception chose to work late, choices arguably inflected by normative and masculinist definitions of work, and recognised as such by later theorists. Matrix women were committed to doing a good job, and recognized the pleasures as well as the stress of long hours: but the pressures of working within an industry where women remained undervalued also affected their choices. Meanwhile the underlying work/effort of making new kinds of (feminist) sense about how to interpret the world, and how to make useful interventions into changing it, cannot be quantified easily. It requires a different understanding of time and effect.<sup>8</sup> This time acts in-between everyday social and spatial practices, as well as differences both in

bodies and social roles. Not fitting the norm (or refusing, challenging and re-inventing the norm) can be tiring work. And it can be energizing work.

### ***B. The work of the artefacts***

1970s and 80s feminist and community activism was pre-internet: consequently it is under-represented on the web. Its longevity is thus at risk. Bartlett and Hendersen have argued that the tendency of feminist artefacts to be ephemeral (collectively produced, without a 'big name' label, and often made cheaply) and not constituted as historically important by institutional collections has perpetuated an assumed lack of value and thus failure to collect, properly catalogue or display feminist artefacts or histories. In reviewing our artefacts we have needed to consider the effects of the shift from analogue to digital production, networks, and archiving mechanisms. How important is the peculiar chemical smell of dyeline making and the clunky feel of hand-cranked duplicating machines; the manual typing, correcting and retyping of texts, punctuated by the clatter of keys and the noise of the carriage return; the inking in, scratching out, amending and re-tracing of drawings? How relevant is it that we communicated by post and landline phone, developing our own particular possibilities for building networks and connections through what now seem very limited tactics? Did/does the different nature of the 'doing' work have particular effects on its makers and audiences; or on the trajectories of the objects themselves?

In architectural production Matrix were early adopters, moving into computers and computer-aided design as these became affordable. A network of community printers as well as other leftist groupings working locally with photographers and graphic artists offered access to current technologies and to talented, socially committed designers. The wider cultural milieu in the UK was also, in this period, supportive of socially oriented activism. The newly opened Channel 4 was committed to art and culture in the service of society, commissioning groups like the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop (BFVW) to produce national TV programmes<sup>9</sup>.



The analogue nature of most of these technologies shaped how artefacts were made, used, shared, and are now preserved. Paper-based archives from this period - particularly of small-scale, under-funded and relatively short-lived architectural and community-based practices - were often not kept after the organisations disbanded, or have been fragmented and stored haphazardly in individuals' cupboards, attics or commercial storage facilities. Some community films have fared better: *Paradise Circus* is archived at the British Film Institute (BFI), and so is still available for view.

This is also about the material trace. In *Material Matters: Architecture and Material Practice*<sup>10</sup> Katie Lloyd Thomas asks us to consider the actual materials (paper, inks, glues) which constitute the book that we are reading, materials which carry the content but, in their application, convey other meanings too; “Economies of production, regulation of standards and labour shape this object, as do the lives and contexts of the many persons who have handled it along the way.”<sup>11</sup> She points to the knowledge revealed and the tactics encouraged when architecture pays attention to “material”, including its production, and gives “making a presence”<sup>12</sup>. The work of making the *Matrix* book or the production drawing or the poster is recorded explicitly to varying degrees; by names, signatures, copyright details, but – as noted above - much remains hidden. Some work, however is revealed by the materiality of the artefacts themselves - the frayed, worn, stamped, interleaved, copy of *Making Space*, or the many handed, scratched, revised, amended working drawings. The book, we can now see, has been handled by two generations of (possibly) feminist architecture students and tutors. The working drawings, through their varied styles and corrections, indicate the exchanges and tensions inherent in a feminist collaborative process. The poster, meanwhile, has remained as a pristine copy, deliberately unused, and set aside in a subliminal attempt familiar to many of us, to archive the rapidly passing activist event; whilst the video suggests ‘unmarked’ repeat playings yet simultaneously resonates of the time and technology within which it is made. Copied from original 35mm film (as shown on analogue TV) to VHS video and then to DVD, the current print is faintly discoloured and scratchy, giving it as dated a feel as its graphic style and fashion sense. Both the pristine

and the marked tell us through their material condition, about mind-sets and processes inextricably linked with feminist, activist practice.

## **Conclusion**

In the spirit of ‘letting the artefact speak’, a complex and sometimes contradictory status vis à vis feminism emerges for each of the artefacts we have presented. We have aimed at an interrogation based on layered concepts around work. But how much of this can be discovered in the objects themselves, and how much requires our prior knowledge and memories? For us, methods of understanding, describing and categorising such pieces in more detail, is at an early stage, a work-in-progress.

As we noted in the introduction, Bartlett and Henderson argue that feminist artefacts can be understood as “of an entirely different economy” that are “intrinsically activist”<sup>13</sup> and challenging to existing society. The curation of such objects should therefore focus on their representative status as oppositional forms (often to celebrate feminist resistance through the alternative non-mass-produced nature of the things themselves.) Here, we began by suggesting that examining objects operating within the sphere of architectural production and consumption requires an extended or alternative definition; one that takes into account the work of negotiating and adapting existing capitalist and patriarchal processes, towards alternative social ends. From our own interrogations we understand feminist architectural artefacts as those that make, either directly or through their effect over time, critical interventions into normative spaces and practices. Implicit in this is an argument for an expansion of what constitutes the archive of architecture; one that blurs across an assumed separation between production and consumption, between architecture as expert knowledge and as everyday experience<sup>14</sup>.

We have also begun to explore such artefacts as records of ongoing embodied work. This means investigating feminist critical interventions as uneven processes, whose trajectories need to be carefully materially traced through both how specific artefacts are created and initially directed, and how they have made their way through the world since

then.

We also wondered about the value and relevance of applying the label feminist to architectural or architecture-related artefacts. This is because of the problem that artefacts are often assumed to *represent* a particular social group or activist movement. In the 1980s, women connected to Matrix were always being asked: what does feminist architecture look like? It was a frustrating question, both because the expectation was of a simple (simplistic) answer about the shape or the façade, and because it was actually the wrong question. Feminist architecture does not need to *look* any particular way. It is a material intervention (however small and uneven) that, amongst other things, aims to challenge and shift normative assumptions about how space is gendered. Similarly, by interrogating artefacts through the work they reveal (rather than only what they express through their form) we hope to offer an alternative to reading feminist objects as ‘things’, arguing instead for interpretation based on feminist *processes*. Preserving architectural and architecture-related artefacts produced and/or used by feminists remains essential to the rebalancing of histories, and the sharing of knowledge through time; but we also need to continue engaging critically and creatively with how such objects are interpreted, and to pay attention to how they can reveal the ongoing labour that feminists – and our artefacts – have done in the past and continue to do every day.

Finally, we ask what this exploration suggests for feminist re-framings of the mainstream architectural archive with its focus on built results, on design rather than occupation. This is not only about what gets represented and what gets repressed by dominant narratives and the often deliberate marginalization and neglect of women in architecture. It is also about how to go beyond simplistic divisions between production and consumption, capitalism and radicalism, design and interpretation. We have shown here through the kinds of methods we are developing and the artefacts we have chosen, how re-thinking the way we select and then interrogate objects connected to building-related processes can potentially reveal something about architecture, constituted not as a physical entity but as embodied entanglements between material, spatial, professional and social practices.

Note: To support and grow this work in progress we have set up an open access online archive of feminist artefacts related to architecture. <https://www.flickr.com/groups/3045444@N23/pool/>

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<sup>1</sup> Collection of feminist objects made for the new National Museum of Australia, 2009. Bartlett, Alison and Henderson, Margaret "What is a Feminist Object? Feminist Material Culture and the Making of the Activist Object," *Journal of Australian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2016): 156-171.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 157.

<sup>3</sup> Bartlett, Alison and Henderson, Margaret, "Feminism and the Museum in Australia: An Introduction," *Journal of Australian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2016):136.

<sup>4</sup> Bartlett, Alison and Henderson, Margaret, "What is a Feminist Object? Feminist Material Culture and the Making of the Activist Object," *Journal of Australian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2016): 157.

<sup>5</sup> Sangster, Joan "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," *Women's History Review* 3, no.1 (1994): 6.

<sup>6</sup> Stead, Naomi and Garduño Freeman, Cristina "Architecture and 'The Act of Receiving, or the Fact of Being Received': Introduction to a Special Issue on Reception", *Architectural Theory Review* 18, no. 3 (2013): 268.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmed, Sara *Living a Feminist Life*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Queer theorists and disability studies scholars have also been exploring different ways of thinking about time, that refuse to disentangle it from different kinds of bodies in space. For example; "Crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of 'how long things take' are based on very particular minds and bodies...Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds." - Alison Kafer *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 27.

<sup>9</sup> "Birmingham Film and Video Workshop," undated conference paper downloaded from [http://media.bufile.ac.uk/c4pp/extras/conferences\\_papers/papers\\_pdf/SBHG\\_Franklin.pdf](http://media.bufile.ac.uk/c4pp/extras/conferences_papers/papers_pdf/SBHG_Franklin.pdf) (accessed October 31, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Lloyd Thomas, Katie *Material Matters: Architecture and Material Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Bartlett, Alison and Henderson, Margaret, "Feminism and the Museum in Australia: An Introduction," *Journal of Australian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2016): 136.

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