

# Architecture and Sexuality: The Politics of Gendered Space

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*“...the body in architecture is not only the essential subject...  
indissolubly linked to the question of gender and sex, a question that has  
generated the most extraordinary metaphors in the elaboration of an  
architectural ideology.”*

— Diana I. Agrest, *Architecture From Without*

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The notion of masculine hegemony is putatively ingrained in society. The maintenance of patriarchal ideology sends ripples in the production of spaces, particularly in architecture and urban planning. Architecture is consummated by organizing and articulating meaningless Euclidean space to accommodate human habitation and insertion of existential meanings. Hence, architecture transcends the neutrality of geometrically determined and physically defined structure and enclosure to become a site of lived life, where cultural processes, gender transactions, and modus of sexual desire are continually enacted.

Space is an instrument of thought and action, which enacts the struggle over power between genders. Yet, it should be recognized that space in itself is not inherently powerful. It is the politics of spatial usage that determine its power. A patriarchal framing of architectural spaces undeniably privileges masculinist power, in its representation of social order, hierarchical progression, polarities, and stereotypical gender roles.

The underrepresentation of women's body and experience in the spatial structures creates a possible setting for subordination and exploitation. This spatial marginalization of women in the architectural appropriation of space sustains the unquestioned operation of patriarchal power in the process of framing human activities, movement, bodily practice, and gendered relations.

It is normally regarded that architecture and edifices are simply “empty” or “neutral” containers that facilitate the free interaction of bodies in space. The validity of this notion is doomed to revision since the ostensibly innocent conventions of architecture operate covertly within a system of power relations to perpetuate or transmit social values, which may stand to subvert or support hegemonic power. Buildings are mechanisms of representation, and as such, they are political and ideological. As James Duncan asserts: “Any discourse regardless of its claims, cannot create mimesis (reveal the naked truth); rather, through its ideological distortions, operates in the service of power”(Duncan and Ley 39).

The gendering of architecture is not straightforwardly visible since the values and ideologies architecture embodies claim universal status and are normally taken as gender-free. However, architecture as a system of representation is saturated with meanings and values which contribute to our sense of *self* and our culturally constructed identity. There is a conspiracy within the architectural practice, which works to dissimulate the active production of gender distinctions permeating the various structures of architectural discourse. Institutions of architectural production insidiously conceal the issues and concepts relating to gender, buttressed by a spatial logic that is “masked in the moment of its application to architecture, as an extra-, or rather, pre-architectural given” (Wigley 330).

To map the terrain of unthematized sex and gender discourse embedded in architecture is to question how architectural configuration, spatial articulation, and symbolic appropriation/representation of the human body operate as apparatuses that engender sexual identity. How exactly is gender constructed in architecture? How, in particular, does the space designated as feminine differ from masculine norm? How is gender relation, which runs along the grid of patriarchal constructions, sustained in architecture?

## THE BODY AS ARCHITECTURAL METAPHOR

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The metaphorical appropriation of the human body is a powerful force in the design of buildings and cities. Metaphors are a naturalizing ingredient in the transference of human qualities in buildings. A transhistorical inventory of architectural design would

reveal that the masculine body is the preferred metaphorical departure in the creation of buildings.

Inscribed within the initial passage of Ayn Rand's objectivist novel, *The Fountainhead*, is the presentation of the ideal man incarnated as its architect hero Howard Roark who stands naked at the edge of a granite cliff. The novel portrayed its male protagonist as an architect, investing on the regnant cultural perception that the building auteur, like the structures they design, embody the very cult of manliness. Roark's strong physique composed of "long, straight lines and angles, each curve broken into planes" (Rand 15), can be likened to a description of Frank Lloyd Wright's *Fallingwater* or a Corbusierian erection. Rand's simulacrum of an architect as the archetypal man purports how culture re-codes the architectural language for the construction of masculinity. She sought building metaphors to articulate the theme of man-worship, while Howard Roark as creator sanctifies architectural doctrine. Rand's uncompromising male character defends the principles of modern architecture with the arguments that equated buildings with masculine virtue, asserting that buildings have integrity just like men. *The Fountainhead* demonstrates how culture and society enlist architecture and architectural metaphors to construct, circulate, and maintain beliefs about gender.

In a patriarchal society, formal codes, conventions of architecture, and city planning theories have been deployed to erect phallocentrism. Anthropomorphism—male body imagery—is pervasive, from phallic construction of skyscrapers to the muscular construction of civic architecture. These are obeisant emblems of a male dominated society. Masculine power is reified and legitimized through the city and its architecture. The famous line of Daniel H. Burnham, the planner of Manila and Chicago, "Make no little plans, they have no magic to stir men's blood" (qtd. in C. Moore 7), epitomizes the masculine virtue of ratio of size and quality.

An architectural transhistorical survey would reveal that architects have attempted to humanize the "architectural body." The formal analogical relationship between human body and architecture ensures the transference of natural beauty into architecture. Analogies between body and building are ever present in our architectural vocabulary—skeleton, skin, face, legs, and feet. Such mimetic tropes

claim to represent nature objectively. Yet Renaissance text, which derives its fundamentals upon Vitruvian text (the “bible” of Western architectural theories), adheres to an anthropometric paradigm, which valorizes the male body in the core of unconscious architectural rules and morphology. Vitruvius, in his seminal text *The Ten Books of Architecture*, cites the form and mathematical symmetry of the human body as the paradigm for design. It is the male anatomy whose ideal measurements Vitruvius subjects to a rigid taxonomy: “Without symmetry and proportion there can be no principles in any design of the temple; that is, if there is no precise relation between its members, as in the case of a well shaped man” (165). As the highest and most nearly perfect earthly creation, man’s body is the natural microcosm of universal harmonies; therefore, architects should design temples in the image of a man. Vitruvian body-architecture parallelism implicitly regards the architectural coding of the body-politic as phallogocentric since Vitruvius dispenses that design of structure should be mimetic of a perfectly proportioned male body.

The Western system of architecture, which is universally studied and followed in theory and praxis, had been governed by male anthropomorphism from the Renaissance (from the writings of Alberti, Filarete, and di Giorgio Martini) through the Modern Movement (Le Corbusier’s *Modulor*, where the anthropometric modules and dimensions were based on a six-foot able white man), implicating the marginalization and exclusion of female in the complex mechanism of symbolic appropriation.

A probe into the architectures of traditional cultures, where spatial orientation is both geometrically and symbolically crucial, would unveil the gender association of certain architectural elements (which usually derive its iconographic reference from anthropomorphism). Vertical architectural elements are usually associated with the celestial, divine, and the masculine, while horizontal elements are associated with the earth, sea, and the feminine. Other spatial and symbolic correspondence includes curve (female) and straight line (male). This correspondence can also be shown as culturally independent. For example, the large internal curvilinear spaces of Southeast Asia are often associated with the feminine body (womb, breast, and so on) as evidenced by the breast motifs of granaries or store houses used in vernacular architecture; the womb-like dark windowless chamber of the Ifugao *fale* and Kalinga

dwellings whose slanting walls, sloping roof, and ceiling appear nearly spherical; and, even the *bahay-na-bato*, the 19<sup>th</sup> century abode of provincial aristocracy, was feminized when the structure was described as “a house with wooden legs and a stone skirt” (Perez, et al. 24). Conversely, similar, non-curvilinear spaces of Western Europe, even when domed, do not evoke the same association. This is not to say that the womb does not exist, but rather it is overshadowed by the non-curvilinear motif of patriarchal culture.

## SURFACE DECORATION, ORNAMENT, AND BUILDING MATERIALS AS SIGNIFIERS OF GENDER

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Architecture also delineates masculinity by identifying manliness as “genuine” and womanliness as “factitious.” Architects since Vitruvius have associated the ornamented surfaces with femininity. Vitruvius writes: “In the invention of two types of columns, they borrowed the manly beauty, naked and unadorned for the one, and for the other the delicacy, adornment, and proportions characteristics of women” (72). As analogous to the human body, the column can be male evoking strength, solidity, and virile beauty—a Doric column with a diameter of one-sixth of its height. It can assume a female form, a Corinthian column, more slender, fragile, and sexier with one-eighth of its height, and surmounted with a decorative capital reminiscent of a head with curly hair.

The sensuality of ornament, and its association with the feminine, was considered a threat in architecture. The building can be adorned and dressed up in a manner that channels the eye from the inner order, creating a deception due to superficialities:

...colored and lewdly dressed with the allurements of painting  
... striving to attract and seduce the eye of the beholder, and to divert his attention from a proper examination of the parts to be considered... the architect... is the one who desires his work to be judged not by deceptive appearances but according to certain calculated standards. (Alberti, Book IV 34)

In this century alone, ornament has come under attack by modernists who espoused the maxim “ornament is a crime.” Thus, buildings are reduced to its inner truths—truth of construction,

materials, form, and function—because of the association of ornament with femininity. Ornament for them is a way to mask reality, make the whole palatable, and can be likened to women, no more than a pleasant addition and appendage.

In the search of an authentic, rational, and timeless architecture, Le Corbusier and others found their archetypal model in the image of the male nude (naked and unadorned) over the female masquerader, embellished with the artificiality of make-up and fashion. Le Corbusier's *Modulor*—a modernist anthropometric scale—is based on the nude male body. While, his *Law of Ripolin*—a thin coat of white wash painted on walls of modern buildings—for example, is associated with masculine traits of hygiene, logic, and truth. This suggests that construction of gender may be achieved through the use of supplemental though apparently invisible surfaces.

Even building materials can claim relevance in the process of gendering architecture. A building's architectural integrity is derived from the masculinization of its materials and culturally-prescribed/connoted manly attributes such as austerity, authenticity, and permanence. Wood paneling is conventionally used for sheathing recreational and professional interiors—men's clubs, bars, law courts, corporate board rooms—which are codified as ruggedly masculine. Masculine properties of being hard, cold, and crystalline are similarly attributed to glass, steel, and stone. The use of applied ornament in order to fabricate a masculine environment are reduced to its inherent qualities and barest essential, adhering to the dictum *less is more masculine*.

## GENDER-DEMARCATED INTERACTION AND DISTRIBUTION OF BODIES IN SPACE

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Recent critical theories suggest the notion of sexual identity as the compulsory repetition of culturally prescribed codes or what Bourdieu refers to as *habitus*, where it has become automatic and natural for us to think, feel, and act according to a defined set of images, languages, and social practices, without inquiring as to the *whys* and *hows* of certain practices as we embody these gendered actions. The regulating mechanism, Bourdieu proposes, is the habitus. He describes it as "...systems of durable, transposable dispositions,

structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goal without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor" ("Structures, Habitus, and Practices" 53). The habitus is not merely a random series of dispositions but operates according to a relatively coherent logic, what Bourdieu dubs as "logic of practice."

The logic is configured primarily in the early childhood within the family by the internalization of a given set of determinate objective conditions, both directly material and immaterial, as mediated through the habitus and thus the practices surrounding adults especially the parents. While later experience will alter the structure of the habitus' logic of practice, these alterations from school or work will be appropriated according to the structural logic of existing habitus. This logic of practice as it operates unconsciously is also flexible so that it can be applied as a structuring principle of practice across a wide range of situations. The logic of practice works with simple categorical distinctions, with such dichotomies as high/low, inside/outside, male/female, etc., principles of categorization applied across a wide range of fields and situations.

Habitus as "structuring structures" implies architecture as inhabited and embodied space, and thus, architectural space can function as a "principal locus for objectification of generative scheme..." (*Outline of a Theory of Practice* 72). Such scheme can assume the mode of instituting sexual identities through dichotomous polarizations based on habitus of gender. Thus the habitus is a gender phenomenon, "a logic derived from common set of conditions of existence to regulate the practice of a set of individuals in common response to those conditions" (*Outline of a Theory of Practice* 81). Architecture sets the conditions in defining the habitus of gender through distribution of bodies in space and delimiting and demarcating the interaction of male/female bodies in space. Architecture's enclosures and bounding surfaces reconsolidate cultural gender differences by monitoring the flow of people and the distribution of human subjects within the space. Through the erection

of partitions or the variation of heights of the floor level to apportion space, architecture contrives to create and maintain the existing social hierarchies and distinctions.

Deciphering the Kabayle house, Bourdieu reiterates the dialogic relationship of space and the body. When the body enacts movement and displacement in space, space structures the bodily practice. Thus, all actions performed in space functions as a structural exercise, which builds practical mastery of fundamental schemes. Thus architecture, with its bounding surfaces, enclosures, walls, and levels, manipulates all bodily experiences. The habitus of gender inscribed in space reproduces and reinforces the dichotomous spatial division between male/female space. Bourdieu maintains:

The opposition between the *centrifugal*, male orientation and the *centripetal*, female orientation...is the true principle of organization of domestic space, is doubtless also the relationship of each sexes to their "psyche," that is, to their bodies and more precisely to their sexuality. ("Structures, Habitus, and Practices" 92)

There is a long history of differentiation of male and female bodies and their assignment to the public and domestic realm. The very features and spatial arrangement of modern cities deploy the dichotomy of sexes: man-office, woman-home. The city also accurately embodies the historic division of labor by gender within a capitalistic and patriarchal set-up: production/reproduction, wage-earning/domestic. Gender relations are thus implicated in the conventional social and hierarchical arrangement of cities, where it is sanctioned that man should dominate space and that the house is woman's assigned place.

Inside the house, women are to be confined deep within the sequence of spaces at the greatest distance from the public sphere. An exercise of masculinist authority implicates a spatial order and a system of female surveillance which make the house as a literal site of female domestication. She is controlled by being bounded and positioned at the end of series of spaces, usually the kitchen or the bedroom, away from the predatory gaze of other men. Thus the space between genders inside the house is further differentiated in terms of location, accessibility, and comfort levels.

The division of gender is made palpable in the layout of public bathrooms. Public bathrooms function as a cultural space that physically segregates the sexes biologically. Aside from being a hygienic site it also doubles as a theater for naturalizing the socially constructed gender according to biological and anatomical functions. The internal partitions within a bathroom that separate the space into enclosed cubicles, together with the cultural restriction against looking at a neighbor while urinating or while doing his/her “private activities,” reinforces the design intentions of the bathroom to guard and avoid homosexual gaze and inflections. Thus, spatialized boundaries work to ward off threatening and forbidden desires. In the plan of both Melchor Hall and Palma Hall (both in UP Diliman) for instance, the separation of gender based on bathroom usage was strictly reinforced in the design lay-out. Male and female bathrooms are respectively located at the end of the east and west wings of the longitudinal floor plan at every level. Such a scheme, which deliberately sacrifices the plan’s functional and hygienic requirements at the expense of the user’s convenience, asserts the specificity of gender (dis)location and differentiation within the academic set-up. The distance of the comfort rooms increases travel time and more exposure to the dangers of harassment and violence against women. Moreover, in Melchor Hall, though its plan and façade are mirror images of Palma Hall, all bathrooms are devoted to men except for two. From this context, it



M. Aleah G. Taboclaon

*Palma Hall*



Manuel L. Guzman

*Melchor Hall*

can be surmised that the field of engineering remains a masculine domain.

Demarcating boundaries between sexual binaries like male/female and heterosexual/homosexual are grounded on spatial dualism. The result is the gender-polarized world: men rule outside, women inside. In a culture dominated by men, it was universally assumed that men should build and women should decorate. Men perpetuated and legitimized this notion because these roles, according to them, are biologically determined because women have wombs and men have penises; thus, women must engage in the process of “protection” while men should aspire for “projection.” So men are engaged in erecting grand and impressive edifices, skyscrapers, and straight streets that “project” and leave a sore-thumb effect on the landscape. But these male erections are usually cold, oppressive, and inhuman. Yet, the confinement of women in the enclosed space of domesticity yields positive results: a domestic interior of women that is warm, rich, nurturing, and comfortable.

Feminist critics argue that the protection/projection binary is not a fact of nature. Rather, it is product of a millennia of oppression brought about by a phallogentric culture. As a reaction, they argue that all of us are like women, trying to carve out a niche for ourselves at home in a world of men. This goes to show that we inhabit two worlds: one of projection that is artificial, abstract, and male; the other is of protection that is sensual, informal, and female.

Psychoanalysts have theorized that the division of the sexes begins inside the womb, where women shelter their babies in the prototype of an interior. All homes that women make outside the body is an attempt to recreate and rebuild that realm for her infant. There is also a biological basis to support the spatial preferences. Psychologist Erik Erikson claims that such association parallels the shapes of the sexual organs: “in the male, external organs, erectable and intrusive in character, conducting highly mobile sperm cells; internal organs in the female, with a vestibular access leading to statically expectant ova” (106).

Adhering to standard Freudian doctrine (penis envy), this suggests that each female shelters an interior world in her body (the womb) and is therefore obliged to replicate this activity in the real

world. A male, on the other hand, has no such space. To him, birth, nurturing, and protection are alien attributes. Instead, he does possess a penis, an appendage which sticks out into space and extends its reach farther through the process of ejaculation and urination. The woman has a built-in wound to which she (according to speculative male psychoanalysts) desires to have an appendage. This penis envy creates a feeling of deficiency among women, for which they compensate by seeking to fill that void.

Bourdieu dismissed and subjected the psychoanalytic practice to a caustic criticism as a speculative field preoccupied with the unconscious mind rather than body geography itself:

Psychoanalysis, the disenchanting product of disenchantment of the world, which leads to a domain of signification that is mythically overdetermined to be constituted *as such*, forgets and causes it to be forgotten that one's own body and other people's body are only ever perceived through categories of perception which it would be naïve to treat as sexual. . . and the interpretation they give . . . always relate back, sometimes very concretely, to the opposition between biologically defined properties of two sexes. ("Structures, Habitus, and Practices" 92)

## FEMALE BODY AS OBJECT OF MASCULINE GAZE

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Architecture conceives a stage where human subjectivity is performed and enacted. Precise organization of materials, objects, and bodies in space are objectified schemes in architecture, which conjures a dialectic of the gazing subject and the gazed object. Certain building types, where programmatic function in architecture distribute activities with specific spatial configuration (i.e., work: office, research: library, shopping: mall, etc.), have profound ideological impact on social interaction—controlling, defining, constraining, excluding, and liberating bodies.

The organization of spectatorship within a specific spatial structure reinforces gender subjectivity. Numerous building types endow men with panoptic visual authority while subjugating disempowered subjects—especially women as scopophilic objects. For example, public space and urban streets are not a safe place for her, for these are potential sites in which predatory masculine sexual

power operate. As the street and public space assumes a synergistic stage for spectatorship and exhibitionism where female bodies and personalities are in continuous parade, lewd stares and probable sexual attacks forewarn her that her body should not be in these spaces. As such, women's use of urban spaces is more constrained for fear of male-initiated sexual violence. Women's susceptibility to sexual assault and their fear of sexual violence lead to a restrained use of specific places, especially at night. The zoning of masculine *tambayans* and the repertoire of fraternity hang-outs within the busy pedestrian traffic route make the innocent female passer-by a subject/object of masculine gaze and amplifies men's privileged access to panoptic vision.

## TOWARDS A GENDER-SENSITIVE ARCHITECTURAL AND PLANNING PROFESSION

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The female body must be rescued from the dominantly male-conceptualized architectures of exclusion, suppression, oppression by representationally appropriating her in a categorical framework wherein her body is re-explored, refunctioned, transformed, and contested. Strategies of empowerment are imperative in order to reclaim her spaces of representation from the asymmetry of masculine framework and dominant conceptualization. Let her voice reverberate in the production of architectural knowledge to topple the very foundation of architectural education and practice.

In the design of structures, let women participate in the planning of their spaces and allow the female anthropometric dimension govern the scale of her structure to avoid the longstanding practice of stereotypical gender assumption translated to active spatial designs. The stereotyping of gender relations universalizes women's needs as unchanging and, therefore, creates building standards which trap women in the roles assigned to them. Recognizing the specificity of women's physiology and psycho-social experience will help neutralize women's isolation and exclusion from the centers of power, thereby maximizing their productive potentials.

The architectural and planning profession is not a bastion of gender equality. Its history and historiography fails to mention and recognize the presence of women architects and planners in the construction of great heroic buildings. It is about time to rewrite the

history of architecture and planning, integrating the gender agenda in the category of analysis.

In the profession, gender inequality is not a simplistic issue of numerical dominance of men in the architectural and planning profession. It is the male dominance in the theories, standards, and ideologies that needs to be questioned, challenged, revised, and infused with gender sensitivity so that women design professionals do not succumb to abandoning or suppressing their feminizing tendency in favor of a masculinized architectural terrain.

We must remind ourselves that an overview is rendered possible only because we who do the viewing perch ourselves on specific sites of potential revision. As architects, the challenge we have to contend with is to create a designed and built environment of and for men and women and those beings whose gender we cannot and should not define. What we should aim for is a gender-sensitive architecture, freed from the stereotyped constructs of gender. In so doing, architecture becomes a structure of emancipation and agent of social change.

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