Introducing Gender and Spatial Theory to the Technical University of Darmstadt

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Incorporating gender issues into the course offerings of an engineering department, along with promoting interdisciplinary research and teaching, is a challenge in a traditionally male-oriented field. The elective course "Gender and the Built Environment" was added to the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering curriculum at the Technical University of Darmstadt (TuDa), Germany in 2013, and it has been taught three times since. This chapter outlines the teaching practices developed for that course and student responses thereto. It shows how students with little previous exposure to either topic discover the ways that "gender [is] lived in and through space and its intersection with other dimensions of identity."[1]

It uses examples from the two major campuses of TuDa, an engineering and science-focused university in the state of Hessen. The university's two primary campuses—one in the city center (*Stadtmitte*) adjacent to a heavily used urban park and a second (*Lichtwiese*) bordering open space on the southeastern side of the city—both have teachable architectural and spatial issues, together demonstrating "the gendered nature of everyday spaces."[2] Ideas of gender are structured by interactions with other members of the university community and public, the urban environment itself, and mental perceptions of safety and danger. Gender and space co-produce each other in urban environments, and a university campus with public art is an ideal place in which to examine how ideas and embodiments of gender both shape and are shaped by surroundings: a mixture of public and semi-private spaces. Students can then take that local knowledge and explore gender and spatiality in cities

1 Johnson (2008), 562.

2 Valentine/Jackson/Mayblin (2014), 404.

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that spark their individual interests. While students were interested in representations of gender in public art, those representations did not keep their attention for long. Instead, the class's discussions of everyday experiences and interactions in cities made the abstractions of spatial theory come to life.

Background

The course was held on the TuDa *Lichtwiese* campus, which was built on an abandoned former airfield surrounded with forests and open space. As the university outgrew its buildings in the Darmstadt city center in the late 1960s, the school built a new campus for its engineering and architecture faculties three kilometers southeast of the center.[3] As the campus grew through the 1980s and early 1990s, and professors complained publicly about the isolation of the campus relative to the city center, the architecture professor Heiner Knell energized the idea of a permanent sculpture park.[4] He envisioned that new artwork would enhance the campus buildings and the walking areas around them, and that the artworks would visually connect to the natural landscape and to the buildings.[5]

The university, the art foundation of the state of Hessen and private donors together could afford the artwork in large part because many of the artists were current or former members of the architecture faculty. Wilhelm Loth and Thomas Duttenhoefer were also able to choose the locations of their sculptures.[6] Furthermore, according to Knell, the committee that chose the artwork wanted contemporary art but otherwise had no specific esthetic criteria: "'Figurative' or 'not figurative' was never a question, there was no interest in this topic."[7] Four of the eleven sculptures had human characteristics: Alfred Hrdlicka's "Marsyas II," Waldemar Grzimek's "The Threatened II," Loth's "Large Female Figure in Diamond" and Duttenhoefer's "The Earth."

3 Architekten Datz Kullman (2005); Karhausen (2002); Scorzin (2002a).

4 Scorzin (ed.) (2002b).

5 'Große Frauenfigur im Rhombus' (1992); Wannemacher 1993; Scorzin (ed.) (2002b); Karhausen (2002).

6 Knell (1991); Hennecke et al. (2002).

7 Chmilecki/Scholz/Scorzin (2002), 18.

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After a sculpture symposium in 1993, no further sculptures were added.[8] The sculpture garden thus provides a readily accessible means of teaching students how gendered objects can affect perceptions of, and interactions with, public space. The sculpture garden, along with the street renaming discussed below, also sheds light on how external gender representations comingle with individual understandings of gendered selves.

Theoretical Framework

The summer 2015 syllabus of "Gender and the Built Environment" included readings from multidisciplinary scholars who have considered the relationship of gender and spatiality. The following discussion focuses on three class activities using discussions and experiences of local space as a means of illustrating the arguments of three scholars: Elizabeth Grosz, Henri Lefebvre, and Dolores Hayden. During the first meeting of "Gender and the Built Environment," students considered Grosz's spatial and feminist theory in her 1992 article "Bodies-Cities" in order to think about the sculptures' implications for gender and spatiality. She argues against two influential philosophical views of the city: first, seeing the interrelationship between bodies and cities as one of historic necessity—people need places to live and work, so they create cities—and second, that cities and their inhabitants share a metaphorical relationship alone: the physical body and the body politic are mirror elements of the same social order. Instead, "the city provides the order and organization that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies."[9] Therefore, the city is one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality. In short, "the city must be seen as the most immediately concrete locus for the production and circulation of power."[10] So, the built environment provides the shape and contour of life and for how people interact with each other.

Secondly, students read selections from the 1991 English translation of Lefebvre's 1977 book *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre's "conceptual triad" of

8 Feuk (1993); Held (1993); Kuntzsch (1993); „Plastiken für Lichtwiese"(1994); Architekten Datz Kullman (2005).

9 Grosz (1992), 243.

10 Ibid., 250.

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space involves three elements: first, spatial practice, "which embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation."[11] Thus, spatial practice includes all the actions that take place within and between human interactions, animate and inanimate objects, and buildings. Secondly, representations of space "are tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to 'frontal' relations."[12] Those representations include signs, printed maps, nowadays geographical information systems and other electronic mapping tools, and other guides to navigation. Thirdly, representational spaces embody "complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life."[13] Representational spaces include individual perceptions, thoughts, memories and meanings that individuals and groups give to spaces. For Lefebvre, spaces are best understood when one is able to comprehend and analyze each of these three elements for them. In October 2013, the university renamed some streets on the *Lichtwiese* campus in honor of the hundredth anniversary of Jovanka Bontschits (1887–1966), the first female student in Germany to complete an engineering degree, who also received a second degree in architecture. This street renaming provided an ideal example for students to apply Lefebvre's three-part concept of space to the campus.

Thirdly, shifting to the *Stadtmitte* campus—where many students also have classes—provided an excellent opportunity for students to apply Dolores Hayden's concept of the "non-sexist city" to the *Stadtmitte* campus and to the immediate surroundings of downtown Darmstadt. Hayden's 1980 article "What Would a Non-Sexist City Be Like?" outlined the various ways that the design of American suburbs around major cities after World War II restricted women's mobility, ability to work outside the home, and general human development.[14] Hayden suggested that the built environment of the suburbs kept women isolated in single-family homes without the economic means to break free of bad marriages or living situations. She argued for reform of the suburbs and identified spatial rearrangements intended to

11 Lefebvre ([1977] 1991), 33.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Hayden (1980).

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remove such isolation would require community efforts to work with cities to rezone single-family residential areas as mixed-use areas. Darmstadt is not a suburb but certainly has sexist elements to discuss.

Methods

On the first day of class, after I introduced the work of Elizabeth Grosz in a short lecture, the fifteen students and I took a walk through the sculpture garden to investigate the extent to which the sculptures illustrated her ideas. I asked them to look at three of the four sculptures with human figures with me (Figures 1–4). The first sculpture that we walked to was Thomas Duttenhoefer's 1993 sculpture "The Earth".[15] The figure expresses the artist's hope that viewers would take better care of the earth. Though the statue may indeed inspire students to be better environmental stewards, my class perceived only degradation and ugliness. Next, we examined Waldemar Grzimek's "The Threatened II", a short walk from "The Earth". Grzimek pictured the figure as a visiting music school student, who was unsettled about his relationship, his education, and his finances. If that is the case, "The Threatened II" is threatened by nothing more than his everyday worries.[16] Lastly, we walked to the last stop, Wilhelm Loth's "Large Female Figure in Diamond."[17] "Large Female Figure" was placed parallel to "Ball/Cone" in 1991 in order to link them and other campus sculptures together visually.[18] A contemporary article on the sculpture described one art historian's interpretation of Loth's work (the detailed vagina in particular) as Loth's appreciation of second wave feminism's articulation of a newly sexually assertive form of womanhood.[19]

On the first day of class, students had a mixed reaction to seeing the sculptures. None of them cared for any of the sculptures aesthetically, and

15 Hennecke et al. (2002).

16 „Eine Plastik von Grzimek" (1989); „Der Bedrohte II" (1989); „Hommage an den Bildhauer Waldemar Grzimek" (1989); Karhausen (2002).

17 Baumann et al. (2002); Maxheimer (2003).

18 „Kunstlandschaft" (1991); Knell (1991); „‚Große Frauenfigur im Rhombus' Gestellt'" (1991); „Große Frauenfigur im Rhombus von Wilhelm Loth" (1992); Wannemacher (1993).

19 „Große Frauenfigur im Rhombus" (1992).

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perhaps they did not want to challenge a professor's perceptions of how the sculptures functioned as representations of gender on the campus. By the end of the period, however, they understood my argument that the statues were problematic (a non-sexist city would be empty of sexist art), even if they did not make associations between the statues and their own lived experiences. The statues were no threat to their health or safety, in the ways that other types of interactions in everyday life in an urban environment could be. Elizabeth Grosz's argument that "a complex feedback relation" exists between bodies and environments was more vivid when interactions took place between living actors.[20] However, these statues alone do not tell the whole story of gendered messages and interpretations of spatiality on campus. They must be examined alongside another set of gendered spatial influences: the recent renaming of the campus streets, and Lefebvre's theory helps do that.

During the second class period, I asked students to restate Lefebvre's theory (which I had assigned them to read) in their own words and to apply it to the renaming of the streets. Concerning spatial practice, the students did not think that changing the names of streets to honor the first female student, graduate, and professor would change people's behaviors in those spaces, beyond the need to change university business cards, letterhead stationery, and websites. As regards spatial representations, they could use their computers, tablets and mobile phones to see if the street names had been revised in online maps and navigational systems. They found that most of the names had changed, and that the university had made a sweeping announcement to that effect. Lastly, regarding representations of space, the students thought through the different ways that the street name changes would rework people's thoughts and memories of these streets. They concluded that the street renaming would serve as a constant present-day reminder of the historical presence of women at the university—not one that people would reflect on with much depth, perhaps, but a reminder, nonetheless. However, the reasons that these seven individuals were chosen muted the renaming's feminist potential. While three streets were renamed for women—including Bontschits who achieved recognition in the university's history through a combination of hard work and historical happenstance—, the four men whose names are now street names were all former TuDa professors honored

20 Grosz (1992), 242.

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Figure 1: Thomas Duttenhoefer, "The Earth" (1993), Technical University of Darmstadt, Germany. Source: Donna J. Drucker.

Figure 2: Waldemar Grzimek, "The Threatened II" (1984), Technical University of Darmstadt, Germany. Source: Donna J. Drucker.

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for international academic achievements alone. It was a missed opportunity to honor female professors who had attained equal success.

What, then, are the experiences of the living women on the campus in the present? The third and last example of teaching gender and space, which examines problems on and around the *Stadtmitte* campus, helps answer that question. I asked the students to describe Hayden's "non-sexist city" in their own words, and then to consider the ways that Darmstadt was and was not a sexist city. They did not focus on Hayden's concerns about married women with families in suburbs but rather on the broader issues of safety, freedom and mobility that she raised. Male and female students had different experiences of the city. A female student mentioned that she did not walk by a certain bar near campus because of the verbal harassment that she received from male patrons shouting out of the windows. A male student visiting from Turkey stated that an introductory presentation for study-abroad students to the university included a warning that female students—but not male students—should avoid walking through the *Herrngarten*, a park in the city, at night. Another female student spoke of unwanted touching on the trams and buses when she was traveling to and from campus. Yet another female student pointed out the poor lighting on the *Lichtwiese* campus at night and stated her concerns about safety when walking alone to the bus, train or tram stops. Altogether, the students concluded that Darmstadt was mostly a non-sexist city, but that there was room to improve both actual security and perceptions thereof, especially regarding public transit.

These three examples of pedagogy for gender and spatiality show that TuDa students have a keen sense of how ideas and experiences of gender operate in everyday life. Overall, the students were convinced that people living in gendered bodies—themselves and the people they encounter every day—affected their own gendered movements and those of others. They were less convinced that static, non-living representations of gendered bodies and names, like those in the sculpture garden and on campus streets, had a measurable impact on the living.

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Conclusion

From the research that other scholars have conducted and the above reflections on teaching the intersectionality of gender and space, it is clear that the creation of gendered spatiality is a set of multifaceted, ongoing "co-constructed event[s]."[21] The interplay of gendered persons and ideas, not to mention other concepts of identity, embodiment and selfhood, is happening constantly at multiple levels of spatiality over time. Not only is it true that "genders are mutually constituted by the performer and by the viewer in a particular space," so too are other forms of identity that affect ideas and perceptions of spatiality, power and control.[22]

At TuDa, research and teaching experiences demonstrate the multiple levels of gendered power that are enacted in various forms in different spaces across campuses and the city. Retiring the two artworks in the sculpture garden that show women as torsos alone and replacing them with sculptures that represent women as wholes would be a good place to start. However, honoring the craft of the living sculptors and the memory of the deceased may keep them in place. Perhaps my own experience of being one of the few female professors on campus, and seeing the sculptures every day, heightened my sense of the need for full-bodied representation. Rumors may continue to structure the *Herrngarten* as a risky place for women to walk after dark, when in fact the public spaces of trains, trams, buses and streets also contain potential threats to safety. Perhaps streets around the *Stadtmitte* or the other three smaller TuDa campuses will someday be renamed in honor of women professors with achievements equal to any of their male peers. In the meantime, I will continue to teach, and students will continue to learn, the deep interconnectedness of gender and spatiality that structures their academic work and everyday life.

21 Doan (2010), 642.

22 Ibid, 645.

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Figure 3: Wilhelm Loth, "Large Female Figure in Diamond" (1989), Technical University of Darmstadt, Germany. Source: Donna J. Drucker.

Figure 4: Fritz Koenig, "Ball/Cone" (1970) with Wilhelm Loth's "Large Female Figure in Diamond' (1989) in the background, Technical University of Darmstadt, Germany. Source: Donna J. Drucker.

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