A Gendered Profession
Reflections on an experiment

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Introduction

In 2016 we co-edited a book, entitled, *A Gendered Profession: the question of representation in placemaking*, together with James Brown and James Soane. This short essay offers some pithy reflections upon the drivers for this project, how they evolved, what has happened since and what we feel is next. (Figures 1–2)

For a profession that professes to serve the needs of wider society through the production of buildings and spaces, continuing gender imbalance in architectural education and practice is a difficult subject. Difficult, because as we discovered, it has been stagnant for some thirty years. In 2016, ninety-two percent of female architects in the UK reported that having children would put them at a disadvantage in architecture: a five percent increase on the previous year. That so many women feel that their profession is prejudiced against them is shocking enough, but the lack of reliable statistics that report male architects' opinions on fatherhood in the profession is equally telling. Given that only five percent of retiring UK architects are female, a professional culture, where the preferred image of the "masters" remains almost exclusively male and where its "mistresses" leave early, demotivated by the lack of promotion prospects and leadership roles is continually reinforced.[1]

1 Only 2/100 of the world's leading architecture firms are directed by women. Source: https://www.dezeen.com/2017/11/16/survey-leading-architecture-firms-reveals-shocking-lack-gender-diversity-senior-levels/, accessed on Feb. 1, 2021.

It was statistics such as this that prompted us; editors, James Brown, Harriet Harriss, Ruth Morrow and James Soane to curate a book on the subject of whether an alternative strategy could be envisioned, although with some caveats. While our editorial profile combined cismale/cisfemale and LGBTQ perspectives on the problem, we are aware that we are all caucasian, northern Europeans, and have, therefore, a framing of the problem that is contextualised by wider regional, racial and economic inequalities. We took the view that feminist thinking is a meaningful mechanism to respond to all forms of inequality caused by modern capitalism. Specifically, we pointed to a generation of inclusive feminist critique that is characterized by a willingness to confront inequalities far beyond "traditional" and outdated gender-binaries. This new critique recognises that the forces disadvantaging some over others have structural rather than social origins, although this does not exonerate the profession of architecture from its evident imbalances. After the Second World War, architecture was a public profession that rallied around its obligation to fulfill a social need, whereas today, the mainstream of our profession has capitulated its servitude to capitalism, evidenced through the shift in its code of conduct. What we only partially succeeded in considering is whether the meaningful and effective responses to gender inequality in architecture that were proposed within the book, could be just as effective at responding to other forms of inequality in architecture too.

Gendered co-authorship

As we watch feminism's "fourth wave" unfold, we have met all too often with the stubborn misconception that feminism is only for and about women. The conversation has to be collectively critical: women cannot dictate a solution to men, just as men cannot dictate a solution to women. However, one could argue that it is a failure of our profession to resolve its own internal inequalities, and a failure of those in positions of leadership and influence, to address the culture that supports inequalities head on. At stake is more than just the lack of female representation. Sexism and gendered practices in architecture condemn all of us to a set of expectations around stereotypical behaviour. Male architects suffer from the same ingrained mechanisms of gender stereotyping that prejudices women, obliging us to place professional commitments above those to our family, children *and* ourselves.

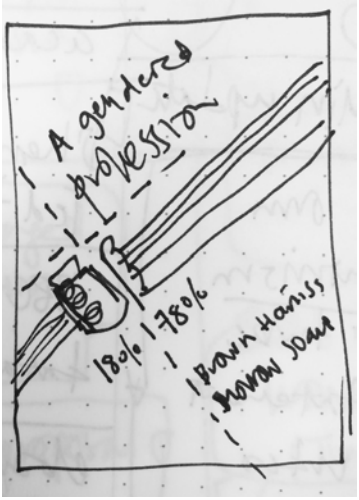

Figure 1: Sketch for the cover of A Gendered Profession, 2015. Source: Harriet Harriss.

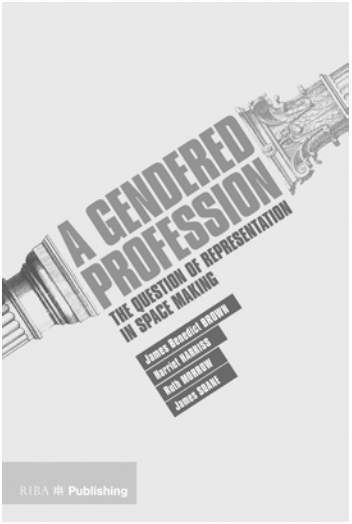

Figure 2: A Gendered Profession. The Question of Representation in Architecture. J. Brown, H. Harriss, R. Morrow, J. Soane (eds.) (2016). Source: London: RIBA Publishing.

And for those whose gender and sexuality do not fit comfortably within the binary conception of male or female, gay or straight, we find that the progress made in improving workplace conditions in the architect's studio has yet to be matched in other aspects of the profession, not least the construction site.

It is therefore critical to dispute not only the traditional binary definition of gender, but also a mono-dimensional concept of gender along a spectrum, one that ultimately categorises everyone between the same binary. We need to think beyond women's experiences of architectural education, practice and culture; gender is instead the key for a broader and more inclusive understanding of how our identity affects our experience of life and work. In order to recast the role of the architect in society it is imperative to take on the political and economic challenges entwined within the gender debate, and hence to practice ethically and inclusively. It is critical to recognise that we operate within relative frameworks. As we age, climb the ladder of progression, grow as an architect—we change too, more often than we might like to think.

Through the writing and editing process, we recognised that any attempt to address the issue of representation would and should be inconclusive and emerging. This issue of representation is being played out not only in books such as this, but, more tangibly, in the built environment around us. We also questioned why it seems so difficult to teach architects about gendered spaces, arguing that if we are to change our starchitect culture, then we must change how we educate students. This also requires us to scrutinise the "master-pupil" relationship, and how competition and long working hours can reaffirm stereotypical "hegemonic masculinity" arguing for new and different labour practices and hours of work that suit both genders; that resist traditionalism, discrimination and academic capitalism. Whether architecture can learn from other disciplines' efforts in order to create more gender equitable environments is also brought into focus, concluding with a statement of hope for a profession in which tacit values and judgments made on stereotypical assumptions will become a thing of the past.

An unsolicited momentum

The *Gendered Profession* book launch took place on Tuesday 8th November 2016 at the Royal College of Art in London, the same day Donald Trump was elected President of the United States of America. Whilst we quaffed student union wine with co-authors and colleagues, we were unaware that we were only hours away from what has amounted to a devastating blow to the progress that had been made towards gender equality and its continuing corrosion thereafter. Having highlighted what we thought of as slow progress and referred to as a "calcification" of the gender debate in our introduction, we were now confronted with the sense that the foundations upon which we could make such an assured evaluation were now crumbling beneath us. Since that day, Trump's many legislative attacks on women's rights, the #MeToo movement, the Shitty Men in Architecture list and the Kavanaugh narrative have made clear that none of the progress, that had been fought and won before the book was even imagined, can be taken for granted. Instead, we have conceded progress for protection and, as that has fallen, only protest remains. (Figure 3)

Fighting back, but differently

Although the queer-positive, sex-positive, trans-inclusive, body-positive, and digitally driven tactics of fourth wave feminism have provided a rapid and often effective response to the corrosion of women's rights, determining preventative tactics requires a more inconspicuous and less immediate approach. It requires a willingness to address the structural rather than the symptomatic and to offer strategies for change rather than damning diagnostics. When we began the book, we recognised the role of capitalism in imposing inequalities upon architecture, but what we failed to really address was the extent to which architecture's inequalities are deeply rooted within its culture. To paraphrase Audre Lorde, the American writer, feminist and activist, we cannot dismantle the master's house with the master's tools. Subsequently, to "fix" any of architecture's inequalities, from the homophobia on site to gendered pay differentials, requires us to challenge (as a reflection of society's) architecture's core values, by questioning its curricula and teaching, its practice processes and its outcomes. Indeed, one argument

Figure 3: "We, student leaders, stand united in response to misconduct." Shitty Men List Protest, Graduate School of Design (GSD), Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., USA, 2018. Source: Malia Teske.

made within the book is that sometimes what we think of as male privilege is at times a trap. And for those who understand the source of their exclusion and marginalisation, rather than seek to gain entry to an exclusive club with which they share few values, they might instead relish the freedom of a place where there are few precedents and no norms to measure up to. And that if we *choose* (and that's the critical component here—that it's *our* choice) to occupy this space then we are free to ignore or indeed upturn the conventions or traditions that seek to bind us. Architecture, then, is whatever we want it to be.

Next steps?

Perhaps now, post-book, in our more radical moments, we recognise that across our own careers, tinkering with given structures has brought about only small changes that have been slow to arrive and tough to gain. Con-

sequently we have become convinced that in order to make significant difference we have to disengage from those given structures and simply create our own. To do so we will need to reposition ourselves to some core societal concepts that create the difficulties that women (and others) face. We foreground two such concepts, chosen because they are so integral to material and creative practices, such as architecture.

The first concept is Time. Women fall outside normative time cultures. Demands on their time can be fragmented and unpredictable. Their temporal rhythms do not sync with the "commodified clock time of capitalist culture." In this way women's time tends to be undervalued and fails to connect to mainstream power structures. Being visibly present in the workplace is connected to status and conveys a sense of being "on top of things". Part-time workers are therefore stigmatised as lacking commitment and reliability. In the past, women have felt encouraged by feminism to work full time—to assert their right to work—yet they have done so within a concept of time that is ill-fitting and where they struggle to balance their time across work, caring needs and their own developmental needs. But whilst it's clearly the social construct of time that is amiss, it is individual women who feel at fault for not managing their time effectively.

Parlour, the Australian project on women, equity and architecture, published guides aimed at improving the architecture profession for women.[2] Of their eleven guides, three dealt directly with the work/time relationship (Long-hours culture, Part-time work and Flexibility). They offer some pragmatic ways to bring about change in the Architecture Profession but clearly there is a need to build more progressive time concepts.

Some clues as to how this is to be done lie in the work of Kathi Weeks in *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries*, where she critiques the "pro-work suppositions" of feminism and questions whether work is in fact an inevitable activity at a time when there is insufficient work to go around.[3] She argues for a reduction in workhours without a reduction in pay, as much to enhance people's productive/creative practices and experiences, as to provoke a reconceptualisation of the role and value of work in society. It's a provocative call, yet by considering the idea of less work or indeed no work, it allows us also to think of play and its

2 https://archiparlour.org, accessed on Feb. 1, 2021.

3 Weeks (2011).

value to society. Indeed, within the creative practice of architecture, we recognise the need to combine creativity and rigor: where maintaining an open and playful attitude is critical when tackling complex problems and where there are moments when it may be best practice to take time to reach decisions rather than rushing pell-mell into an ill-thought resolution. Indeed, we are starting to accept that in professional roles, the cognitive aspect of the work continues beyond the office, on the school run, in the surgery waiting room, etc., and that part-time in such jobs means only "part-time-present" not "part-time-engagement." There is clearly an upside to part-time work that we have failed to fully understand and a marked urgency to re-conceptualize our work/time relationships, to reconsider the balance of up time, down time, thinking-time, playtime and taking time.

The second concept is Technology. One only has to scan the literature to see how infrequently Feminism and Technologies of the Built Environment are referenced. When it comes to technology and innovation, women's efforts have naturally been focused on industries where they have been employed or in those areas that affect their daily lives. As one indicator of this, we tend to see women patenting technologies in textiles and home appliance sectors but rarely in construction. Of course, historically, technology has been gendered, where certain knowledge and skill domains dominated by women are considered as "craft" and only gain significance and become named as "technological" once they are appropriated by men. The term "technology" itself can be off-putting—even today where it is synonymous with information, gaming or virtual technology, the number of women active remains significantly lower than their male counterparts. Feminists, however,have begun to unravel our relationship to technology—at least in theory—expanding the definition and creating new narratives. By taking the focus off "the thing of it," placing more emphasis on tacit interactions and diverse and underrepresented knowledges can lead to inclusive material ecologies. The next step is to look for existing methods and to generate new examples where theory becomes practice. To some extent the book did that, but we need to look for further examples of where technology has been re-appropriated to suit the practice of others outside of the mainstream. (Figure 4)

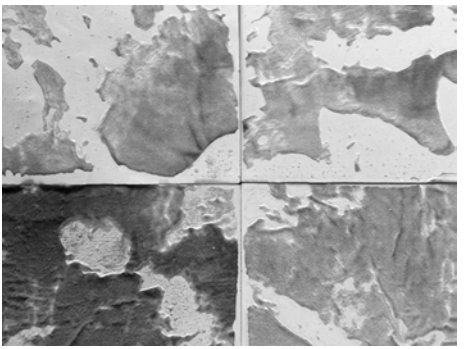

Figure 4: Making Hard Things Soft: Velvet and Concrete Patented Technologies from Tactility Factory, Belfast. Source: Trish Belford and Ruth Morrow.

Concluding comments

The book sought to offer a diagnostic check on our profession. But the condition is on-going, and the case is definitely not closed. The infrastructure of both education and practice requires systems which routinely perform a diversity and inclusion health check on the profession: one that not only monitors the problem but prescribes solutions too. Whilst we all seem too willing to admit that an inclusive discussion on the subject of architecture and gender is needed, one that can address some of the injustices facing our discipline, we see so few attempts to initiate these forums, platforms and policies for change, even on a personal level, with colleagues at work.

We remain resolute in our conviction towards the importance of feminist texts on gender, no matter how quickly they date. Because in those dark times, when we as individuals doubt our value, it is these texts, whether in hand or online, that support, make sense of and depersonalise the challenges and exclusion that we face.

We are under no illusion that the gender question will ever go away but instead point to the principles and practices of what is now the potential beginning of the Fifth Wave of Feminism: that an attitude of inclusion is more than an act of publicly calling out the problem, but one characterised by taking strategic and tactical ACTION!

Acknowledgments

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Literature

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