



Desiring Practices

Architecture, Gender and
the Interdisciplinary

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Desiring Practices Exhibition, October 1995.
RIBA Architecture Centre.
Photo: Rut Blee Luxembourg

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Practice: the Significant Others

Introduction

A dinner party in a north London kitchen, October 1993. At the table are five women and two men. Our host has invited a group of architects to swap ideas for a future, as yet unknown, project. The conversation turns around current pursuits and preoccupations, predominantly focusing on work. Trained as architects, we are all practising 'architecture' in some form, but these forms are varied, marginal, and certainly do not reflect the idealised image of the architect-hero we were led to expect. For some, a series of part-time jobs with no security or advancement is an economic imperative, while others are trapped within the limits of a traditional career path. These choices may be the manifestation of millennial labour conditions, but something else is at stake. This very gathering signifies a shared feeling that our occupation leaves us with a sense of dissatisfaction, a lack. A lack of space, or territory, or autonomy, in which to practice our desires. It is more than a sense of disenfranchisement: it is a feeling of symbolic castration. Can it be a coincidence that most of us are female?

The traditional classifications which keep theory remote from practice, writing remote from construction, sexuality remote from administration (to cite three arbitrary examples) were evidently problems within our own activities. Although our experiences were personal and singular, the replication of boundary transgressions across a range of architectural working practices suggested a more structural deficiency. Borne out by common experience, we shared a conviction that the regulated space of architectural practice was restrictive, limited in its scope, underdeveloped, inflexible; its interests did not acknowledge our experience or satisfy our architectural desires. Where was the scope for a desiring practice?

'Skirting' the issues

The technical-rational ideology of architectural practice (which limits it to professionally defined services representing an 'ideal' state of architectural production) fails to account for the changing activities many architects actually perform. While acknowledging that such activities are related to broad social changes, I contend that the forms of practice taken up within the broad category of architecture have other influences, the origins of which are simultaneously invisible (patriarchy), but also close to the surface (only 9% of architects are female). In common with other cultural products, the structure and ideology of the profession, its values and interests, predominately reflect phallogocentric interests. Although a profession with a liberal public image, architecture ironically finds scant space to locate the female or the feminine either as a symbolic or a corporeal presence. It is time for architecture to put its own domestic space in order.

Desiring Practices developed out of an urgent need to investigate the forbidden spaces of architectural practice, taking gender as the focus of its enquiry. While many forms of architectural expression—writing, publishing and becoming active at a political level—remain under-scrutinised, Desiring Practices specifically wished to challenge the order of practice. Starting with our own experiences, we wished to explore the myriad emancipatory ways in which architectural production can take place. Our intention was to find new sources for beginning an investigation into the multiple directions that architectural work can take, in an attempt to find a new acting position for those—men as well as women—whose voices and bodies are currently excluded from the architectural mainstream.

For myself, a personal mission runs in parallel with the more general aims of the project. My own work has always fallen somewhere between practices, crossing as it does between writing, teaching and building. An 'identity problem', not so much for myself as for others. As an architectural assistant, working in London's building boom of the 1980s, a desire to go into education was regarded at best, with suspicion, at worst as treachery. Every bureaucracy I have encountered has bargained for my soul—my total commitment. What I have regarded as an attempt to maximise the benefits of variety, adventure and exchange has been interpreted by patriarchal organisations as flirtation, absence of single-minded purpose and unreliability. While for me the transgression of boundaries is an enriching experience, I have learnt that others do not share this opinion: I do not declare the existence of an 'other' life if my livelihood depends on it. While this is a problem for men and women alike, it is clear that a gender issue is implicated here. Working practices—conditions of part-time work, the structure

of the working day, the division between office and home, the ways pension rights and benefits are calculated, the ways in which education and practice organise given periods of life—are arranged by men to suit men. Part-time practices are, and have always been, women's misfortune.

The personal

My personal interest is in how the social construction of sexual difference, and the value ascribed to gender roles, becomes institutionalised in the practices of everyday (including professional) life and how one can change them. Recently, architectural scholarship has begun to address this issue and this work has been received by an eager audience, clearly recognising a collective lacuna in the traditional concerns of architectural discourse. This work has tended to take up a position of theoretical postmodernism. However, an important part of feminist research is to step outside of the circular logic of rationalised theoretical thought and to reformulate the terms of the argument in relation to (women's) lived experience of the political and social world. Its aims are social, but its means are personal, political and symbolic. At least for me, therefore, questions of gender (perhaps more than sexuality) are a fertile but under-explored territory in which to make a critique of dominant ideologies and their social practices. Such critiques begin with my own experience.

To focus on the exclusion of women opens to interrogation concerns about the spatial and material practices of architecture. It raises questions such as who is allowed to speak, who has access to architectural products, as well as the social and working relationships which produce its spaces—which production methodologies prevail, and who claims authorship. Received wisdom limits the possibilities for rethinking the values ascribed to these spaces, and access to the political processes that allow us to change them. For instance, women's experience of the streets, parks and public transport, as well as housing—the city—is not the same as men's, but with some notable exceptions, architecture remains indifferent to this 'other' experience. We need to debate what is meant by 'tidy', 'humane', 'safe', 'clean': concepts that architects regularly accept unquestioningly. One of the questions Desiring Practices poses is: who is the ultimate judge of what things 'mean'? Meaning is the product of creative dialogue which puts the individual—the 'I'—into play. Who decides the value of my work and how I should produce it?

The Desiring Practices project proposes criticisms that raise questions about epistemological validities within the discipline of architecture. Architecture has a long relationship with the ideology of 'mastery', not only at the symbolic level ('God, the architect of the Universe') but also at the practical. Mastery implies a

totalising ethos which reduces temporal, topographical, sexual, material, conflictual difference to the masculine, singular, active. Its ideology of domination through knowledge, represented in the profession's publications such as the RIBA's *Plan of Work*, belies the shrinking realities of the profession.

The Plan of Work... sets out... the key tasks of the architect's management function. The responsibility here is to foresee, as far as practicable, all the problems that are likely to arise, to make arrangements to ensure the solution to them in good time, and to take the necessary action on unplanned eventualities. In this role of leader the architect's responsibility is total... *He* [my emphasis] should create a complete guide to the action of the whole job...'

Although business-oriented firms to whom this document is addressed (and who form the profession's most powerful voice) lean towards the large and multi-disciplinary, with its attendant desire for total control, there is now huge scepticism in the masterplan as a viable operational and design strategy. This is an ironic liaison that unites social groups as disparate as community activism and *laissez-faire* politics, including Desiring Practices.

Notwithstanding the attempts to define practice through instrumental procedures, it is precisely because the contingent conditions of practice are impossible to predict that it maintains its ability to challenge, surprise and confound. To keep practising is to develop, to know more, to acquire judgement. But every situation presents the unforeseeable: the *unknown*. To me, this is the most pleasurable part of practising: it is also the reason why it is so rarely theorised. Desiring Practices wanted to scrutinise the terms of practice's theorisation and claim back its procedures as flexible situations of unique, participatory and pleasurable activity. In turn, it was important for us to theorise the forms of practice adopted.

I see the production of the events by Desiring Practices as a form of architectural practice in itself. On a personal level, as a 'practising' architect, it absorbed a considerable proportion of my life (working and otherwise) over a period of two years. In one sense of the word 'practice', therefore, the project manifests aspects of the truly habitual. To the extent that it depended on the events' success, however, the project was not a question of 'just practising'. It was a one-off performance which had to work first time round. This is also the case with building projects. An attention to detail, an appreciation of the complexity and connections of various aspects of the project, an ability to anticipate desired goals and to deliver them on time are common to Desiring Practices and building projects alike.

My other practices—the production of buildings, drawings, writing and research—were usurped to make space for Desiring Practices. Yet in many ways the activities engaged in and the knowledge used on the latter slip imperceptibly between the category of builder, writer or researcher and that of symposium and exhibition organiser. The tasks involved share numerous similarities: programming, project management, fund-raising, dealing with bureaucracy, marketing, and they can be ordered in the same way as the *Plan of Work*: inception, feasibility, design, cost analysis, tendering, site supervision. In addition, our project demanded the habitual tasks of the manager: setting up structures of office administration, evaluating successes and failures, staff resourcing and recruitment, spatial organisation and financial planning to name but a few. Moreover, public relations, publicity and fund-raising played a major role in the project and confirmed for me the importance of the architect's role in the construction of her own identity.

Unlike practice, however, the making of Desiring Practices cried out for a reassessment of the conventional relations of production and representation of the architectural project. As one form of desiring practice, it was important that our own practice attempted to address some of the shortcomings our own critique had identified.

The political

The problem of the binary raises interesting questions in relation to a commitment to the representation of multiple voices and desires. For me, the relativism of competing narratives fails to address two fundamental practical problems in the struggle to change the status quo. At a practical level, we have to start by acknowledging that our society is structured, at a symbolic level, around a binary whose foundational difference is sexual (the biological and symbolic possession/lack of the phallus). Although the challenge to this symbolic framework is an essential project because it is of crucial significance for the fundamental shift in society's order, there is an urgent need for political and social strategies for action while we await the dismantling of existing structures. I argue that such strategies *must* employ the binary, so as to demonstrate the injustices and inconsistencies which lie behind the 'truth' of patriarchal culture. We must use the binary against itself. While the binary insists on the categorisation of difference, to erase such difference before the dominance of the existing framework has been broken and the 'other' has found a voice, is to subsume the voice of the 'other' to that of the dominant ideology and in the process to erase it.

The acknowledgement of multiple positions (such as those which privilege race, class, production or capital) implies a relativity of theoretical critiques that, it has been argued, locate feminism as just one among many views competing for position. This offers the tactical advantage of enlisting solidarity from other voices that would seek to undermine the white/male/western/heterosexual/middle class frame of the world. However, the theoretical equality of sexual 'otherness' is called into question when subjected to the critique of the specificities of the social and political world. While there is an obvious problem with meta-narratives of feminism that attempt to elide the differences between women across social, economic, racial and geographical boundaries, it remains possible to contextualise the position of women in the social realm without resorting to a crude biologism. Insisting on the acceptance of the prevailing binary of sexual difference as the starting point for a critique of current conditions does not negate other differences: it simply locates the condition of being female (spatially, economically, geographically) as a fundamental particular in the realm of the 'others'. I claim, therefore, that important as it is to maintain the multiple narrative at a theoretical level, at a pragmatic one, the efficacy of the binary has yet to run its course.

Desiring Practices was conscious of difficulties in dealing with these issues, at times knowingly using the binary and at others deliberately using strategies that worked against it. The project itself took shape under the conventional classifications of textual and visual work (symposium and exhibition)—itself a binary classification. It followed that the team was bifurcated around the organisation of these two events as well. While this could be regarded as an illustration of the hierarchical and binary division characteristic of the dualities practice/education, theory/design, conception/making, manager/worker, in practice the situation was more fluid. While it is probably true that the three founder members of the project had most freedom to move between these individual sites of action, the project re-evaluated for many of us the interdependence of various forms of architectural production (specification writing, building work, scheduling, the working drawing, management) and demanded a reassessment of the importance of all the components of the team's effort in order to achieve our goal. In as much as Desiring Practices mirrors architectural practice, reconsidering the relationship between 'designer' and 'executor', the form taken by the written, the drawn and the object, the sites of bodily and imaginative encounter, and the means of recording the actual process, demonstrates the purpose of re-evaluating the instruments and the knowledge of architectural production.

In common with other feminist projects, *Desiring Practices* shared a commitment to developing new paradigms of criticism and of action which rejected conventional philosophical epistemologies which have been shown to be partial, historically contingent and politically interested. However, as these theories have passed into mainstream culture they have come to be regarded as a historical, objective and 'natural', so much so that they have become invisible. The 'neutrality' of such 'truths' remain unchallenged because their interests go unrecognised. In patriarchy, the phallogocentric position of the 'truth' takes primacy in the order of things. A woman's position is spoken *for* her. In order to define a new 'speaking position' which acknowledges the gender of the speaker, there must be an insistence on new strategies of reference over and above 'the subjective'. The *Desiring Practices* project requires a renegotiation of the terms and conditions on which architectural debate can take place. This means relinquishing—and asking others also to relinquish—existing relations of 'truth', and an acceptance of a revised vision in which realities and appearances are no longer considered self-evident and taken for granted.

The key to such a project implies a willingness to risk one's creativity without securing for it the safety of a known outcome, which is to say, incorporation within a shared theoretical framework. On the other hand, there is a danger that to relinquish any reference to existing theory is to risk incoherence or to retreat into the silence of subjectivity. Therefore, this project insists that a new relationship is established—one in which the revisionary position can be taken up only with respect to current norms of practice and theory. In our case, the strategy was to subvert the ordering implied by the binary, expecting that other readings would emerge. The problem with this aim may perhaps best be illustrated with reference to the following quote taken from a review of one of the project's exhibitions: "... it all remains a bit nebulous, and inevitably one's suspicion is that the intention is not entirely clear either... one feels a lot of issues are being rolled into one, with a resulting loss of focus".²

The project's reception by the press, sponsors and audience is interesting with reference to the representational strategies of the project. In the sense that buildings have a life beyond the control of their designer, *Desiring Practices* has a public life independent of its originators. This allows for multiple interpretations and engagements. While being democratic (anyone may participate in its reading), it engenders fear that the author's intentions, which must secrete the 'truth', might be misunderstood. In all aspects of culture, including architecture, this fear is assuaged by control over the dissemination of information and publicity; and by fastidious cultivation of image—personal, corporate and drawn—including reference to recognised hero-models. *Desiring Practices'* resistance to suggesting what the answers were, merely where they might lie,

together with our attempt to work with the material presented to us rather than exclusively invited (and of course, an absence of role-models), implies a commitment to admit to the contingent possibilities of the work 'out there' rather than any preconceived model of practice (or practitioner). This was clearly regarded as problematic.

Desiring Practices never quite overcame this problem. The prerequisite of securing financial and spatial support involved convincing those who did not necessarily share our horizon that the exercise was of value. Although unprecedented in architectural projects, our remit was welcomed by the Arts Council whose staff were familiar with the presence of both feminism and postmodern theory in artistic endeavour. Other bodies did not prove as easy to convince, and to this day the project remains mysterious to many in the institutions of architecture (including academic ones). While not unaware of the possibilities for an 'economy of truth' in the presentation of the project, the really interesting aspect of our determination to represent the project in the way we desired, was to discover who was open to it and who was not.

The body

'Habeas corpus'
'You will have the body'

The historical absence of the female body from the sites of architectural production has relegated it to the object of symbolic representation: in the origin myths of the classical column, for example, or the symbolic embodiment of virtues such as justice or liberty. The frequency with which the symbolic female body is inscribed in architecture occurs in proportion to the living body's distance from the 'hard labour' of the building site. The arguments that have characterised the female body as passive, fickle, carnal and dissembling, have also relegated the female labour force to the back rooms of design offices, to the 'sensitive' projects, to the domestic world (kitchens and bathrooms a speciality) and to interior design. The systematic exclusion of the female from the articulation of both her own symbolism (not just as the object of representation but as subject in the creation of the symbolic) and from participation in constructing the practice of architecture, means she remains largely unrepresented in architectural culture.

The survival and protection of architecture's sacred knowledge relies on its reproduction through generation after generation of architects. The parallel between this process and maintenance of patrilineal kinship (through naming, marriage, and property rights) is intended. In architecture, this patrimony is

encoded both in its epistemology and professionalism—the theoretical and the practical branches of its knowledge. Significantly, the term reproduction implies a ‘naturalisation’—an inevitability—which reinforces the ideology of the dominant power group. It is a premise of our project, however, that in reality, such relations are not reproduced: rather, they are produced. They are not inevitable but are used knowingly to maintain power in the hands of those parties whose interests they serve.

The scarcity of role models has important implications for the female architect. On the one hand, the models open to men are defining and confining; the absence of such preordained roles allows women the freedom to play the market as they will. On the other hand, my own experience suggests that colleagues, clients and patrons alike feel more comfortable with those who are like themselves: the ‘other’ is treated with suspicion. The attributes of the charm school sit uncomfortably beside the ‘gravitas’ of the trustworthy professional. Proving oneself in every new situation exacts its weary toll. But however impossible the task may seem, it is essential for women to announce their presence on their own terms; to resist or manipulate the stereotypes and refuse to remain hidden as the support staff in the office back room.

The RIBA’s headquarters in Portland Place is a central locus for the production and control of the patrimony of architecture. As a body politic, the Institute is one of the crucial sites in which one can contest Architecture’s official values. We took the view that our challenge could be most effectively made known if we took it to the Institute rather than locating ourselves in opposition to it. While we knew we ran the risk of being viewed as complicit with RIBA’s own politics, our intention was actually to subvert it. The free market which operates the current administration means that its spaces are commercially available, permitting those with the means to buy access. In the enterprise economy, cash bought us a critical take on the profession. We determined to put the female body—both symbolic and actual—back into architecture.

Our strategy involved filling the building with female bodies at the symposium; locating and naming those taking part at their places around a conference table, the central feature of the exhibition there; and symbolising women’s ‘possession’ of the Institute by implying the presence of the meeting which appeared to be on the point of taking place. The subversion of the room’s designated function (exhibition space) into a different one (conference room) went unperceived by many of those who innocently entered spaces already laden with the iconography of the gentleman’s club. They didn’t notice that the paintings of past Presidents had been supplanted with (largely) Women’s work.

The body politic

A principle of the project was that it would not form a platform for the display of the organisers themselves. Although most of the people involved in the project had work to contribute (we were writers, teachers, makers, builders), one of our missions was to question the competitive basis of architectural work, and the star system which values the novel, the glamorous and the individual. We aimed to stress the rewards of collaboration and co-operation. With the possible exception of these essays, the names of those associated with the project remain deliberately obscure, and the project lives by its collective title, not the names of its founders.

This practice goes against the grain, requiring determination and a re-evaluation of expected rewards. A democracy can only operate if those involved are committed to it; so disagreements sometimes become passionate. Although this makes them an invaluable part of the experience, promoting respect and advocacy, there were moments when different viewpoints threatened to undermine the stability of the group. Delegation and personal responsibility became inextricable as conflicting opinions about where ultimate decisions rested were fought through in public. As none of us were paid, the project stood outside the normal economy. Everyone made a bargain with their other life, exchanging this for the satisfaction of simply being involved.

Desiring Practices began life around a kitchen table and continued a peripatetic existence in common with other marginal pursuits. Comprising, at its largest, seventeen people working part-time, at weekends and during out-of-office hours, in deserted offices and at home, our project resembled an under-cover operation. We used the spaces of the city (restaurants, cafés, pubs) as our meeting room. Communication relied on masses of photocopying, and would have been impossible without the phone and fax. In common with the experience of many women, ‘a room of one’s own’ remained an elusive and desired space. It was the experience of holding the project together during key moments of spatial and temporal simultaneity that reaffirmed my personal conviction that architecture’s mission—especially for women—is not (yet) redundant.

Postscript

The final day of the symposium provoked one question of particular interest from a member of the audience. The question was directed at the organisers, and I was on the podium. It concerned the reasons why the form of the symposium had not itself been reinvented. This observation implied two things:

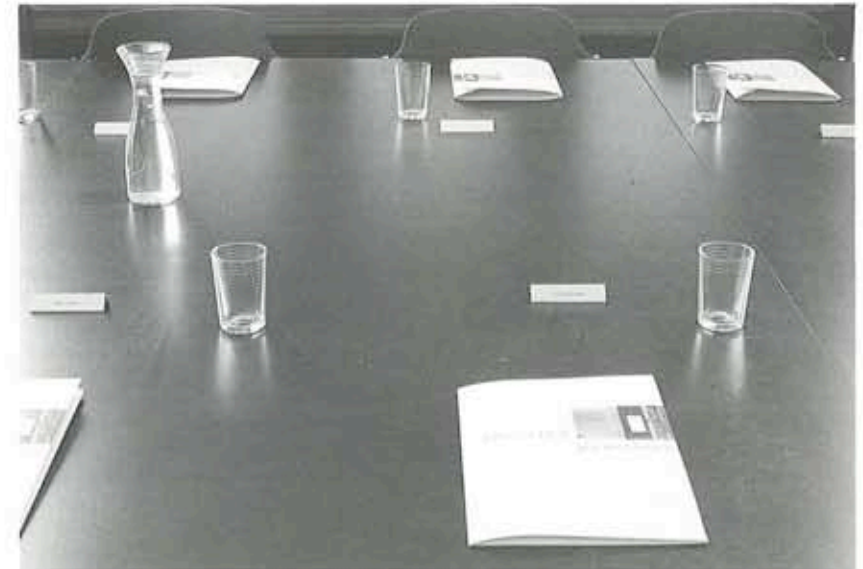
that a 'radical' conference should by definition reinvent its own form and that the form it took was *the* privileged aspect of its existence. Something about this proposition reminded me of those debates that are current in architectural discourse, extrapolated to the practice of conference organising: the desire for novelty, the fascination with form at the expense of content, the suspicion with anything that smacks of precedent. Not for the first time in the history of the project, the equation of architectural practice with symposium organisation seemed clear. Clearer still, the same ideologies lay beneath both.

My response has two strands: first, that reinvention is a useful weapon in specific circumstances but involves its own tyrannies, not least of which is a blind adherence to the pursuit of 'progress' without considering its relation to the past, present or future. The aspects of the Desiring Practices project which were reinvented were carefully planned to achieve specific purposes. We used a binary ordering sometimes as a mask, at other times purposely working against such a device in order to reveal its shortcomings. Knowing this would provoke fluid readings and challenge accepted notions of control, we took the risk anyway. Secondly, the question revealed the presence of the binary in another way: by privileging the form of the symposium over the process which brought it about. If practising has any value at all—and this was a key premise of the project—I contend that it lies in the relations and structures that *produce* it and not necessarily on its material outcome, the product of that practice. So, if finally we fell prey to yet another dualism, at least it was not unwittingly.

This essay is a reflection on that question; a reflection which draws an analogy between the practice of architecture and the process of production of the Desiring Practices project. I hope it illustrates the tentative beginnings of one form of desiring practice.

Notes

- 1 "Working To The Plan", *Plan of Work for Design Team Operation*, reprinted from *The RIBA Handbook 1973*, London: RIBA Publications Ltd., 1973, (no page nos.).
- 2 Melhuish, C., "Blurry Vision", Review of Desiring Practices Exhibition (RIBA Venue), *Building Design*, 6 October 1995, p. 23.



Desiring Practices Exhibition, October 1995, detail of 'conference table' installation. RIBA Architecture Centre
Photo: Rut Brees Luxemburg