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wander_woman_wonder: sexual difference in urban design

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Where the premise of my research is based on the perception that, "despite woman's improving status in society, woman's access to outdoor public space remains problematic and constrained", this (working) paper seeks to expose what is habitually concealed from discussion: the (sometimes messy) meditations which proceed and accompany the process towards an outcome of work, or of 'the product'.

If I were wise, I could find the words to clearly qualify my need to address sexual difference in the realm of design. I would express sexual difference in the context of landscape architecture specifically, and in the design of the built environment generally. But in an attempt to find the 'right' dialectic to articulate the space which exists between woman and man, men and women, as both users and creators, and the social constructs which envelop these interpretable words, this reflection forms part of the struggle I have in finding a language where words are to be perceived as sharing -- a space in between -- rather than criticizing.[1]

To be able to seek out an applicable language, to develop the foundation upon which the issue of women and urban design can confidently root itself, absorption in the philosophy of select feminist scholars has been essential. These works of wisdom by women who have challenged the rules of patriarchy without creating new hierarchies, heighten my wonder and ground my passion. Although provoking much mental *jouissance,* the abstracted and contested views nevertheless do not point directly to an 'application' of sexual difference to design. As a result, I grapple inwardly with the desire to find the correct speech to translate the thoughts back out from their internalization, first into discussion, and then, into the realm of design. I am constantly aware (and reminded) of the requirement to grind concepts into reality.

In an attempt to begin this transition, this short paper touches upon two areas for discussion; one: a brief synopsis of binary opposition as a thought process which upholds current values and traditions that perpetuate a polar rift between most facets of life, including design; and two: an introduction to three 'spaces' that I have

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[1] I am also cognizant that feminists are divided on the continued reference to humans as split into 'women' and 'men' and the patriarchal constructs this may uphold. However, that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, given its briefness.

identified as having the potential to 'bridge' these rifts and to move us towards an appreciation of difference in design.

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My process of researching woman in the design context inevitably starts with an exposure to philosophical writings by modern theorists. These readings, of text and of self, lead me to maintain and to evaluate how as individuals in the modern world we contribute to a perpetuation of an internalized 'norm' of society. While it may seem redundant to some to highlight the fact that we live and think in a society that is built on discourses that either uphold or deconstruct the structures of binary opposition without appreciating them, attempts to mediate the gap between past and present times have not been largely successful, and that, not to my knowledge in design.

A discussion on binary opposition is relevant to environmental design, given the prevailing *nature* of the *culture* of the creative field. Where terms such as: light/dark, solid/void, positive/negative, private/public, indoor/outdoor and hard/soft perpetuate thinking that attaches significance on a have/have not dialogue rather than valuing each attribute for its merits and strengths, it is important to emphasize the overall resulting effect. Where this language within design upholds the traditions of a vertically hierarchal system, this system, I must add, also posits man as the opposite of woman, man (the 'one') being the basis of comparison to woman (the 'other'). This system of duality negates a conversation and convergence between opposites. I speculate that the translation of this language into the environment - in built form - contributes to the binary divide in an exponential way. Based on the contention that as a reflection of society, urban spaces shape us as we shape them, the current language of the built environment clearly continues to perpetuate a 'break' rather than a dialogue between different domains. The built environment is not a *tabula rasa*; it is an intentional configuration of space created over time by those who have had the power to exercise their will on the general public. Urban space is a palimpsest of hierarchies of the past and of the present. This discussion hopes to create a connection to (change) the future.

Another regular maintenance of binary opposition within design disciplines is found in the disconnection of opinion between designers on what one defines as 'practice'. Discord and tension over whether or not one must produce an 'object' to truly practice architecture, or 'move earth' to practice landscape architecture is widespread. An invaluable statement by Catherine Ingraham addresses this issue. She writes that "[t]he opposition between words and things, which is also the opposition between theory and practice, behaves like many oppositions of this kind: 'what is most characteristic of these oppositions [words versus things] is that as soon as you put pressure on them they break down. Each time one element of a pair is driven into a corner, it changes shape and frequently turns into its opposite".(1998) I emphasize that the fixation on prioritizing one form of expression of design over another, simply contributes to perpetuating the status quo. It is imperative to note that without thought and reflection, design falls into the lowest level of a status quo and without (any) design, there is not much left to think about. While they are interdependent, they are also independent.

Individually, both writing and designing allow the creator to slow down and to reflect upon the issue(s) being considered where an'other' comes into view. That is, where theory and reality inform each other, but where the latter starts and ends as the 'third space' becomes the question. (Har   ardóttir , 1998)

Binary opposition in this framework leads to discussions (and disagreements!) amongst feminist circles with regards to 'what' the result of the struggle for an inclusive world should entail. (Cavallaro, 2003) Namely, whether we should strive for a world of 'equality' or one which recognizes 'difference'; for example, do we formulate a place for ourselves within the existing conditions alongside men, in the hope that we will be treated in an equitable way (ie: income, opportunities), or one which suggests a remapping of current trends, where both women and men take part in the construction, aware of the complexity which individuals can contribute to community, of a 'new society'. Of course this is a simplification of larger arguments, but I highlight them here to clarify the possible ways of mediating the binary, what I hope to refine to qualities of a 'third space'.

The lexis and compositions of words of Luce Irigaray, a French philosopher, inspire me to endeavor to identify this imagined 'third space'. Irigaray explores influential Western philosophical works to expand upon her distinct voice on sexual difference. Her writing is influential in creating a place to contemplate the (built) world that exists, and to positively envision another inclusive space (to practice design). This space does not negate the existing; it purely identifies it and forms its own. Reading Irigaray's work, I begin to see the need to prioritize the concept of space-time, where a rejuvenation of thought allows me to reflect and to possibly turn over previous impressions of my'self' (2000). Without a 'fresh' perspective and discourse on the self in relation to the 'other', writing myself in a world apart seems as the only way to address sexual difference in design, even if I know it overlooks the objective of creating a community that acknowledges sexual difference, by isolating it. In moving away from this natural reflex, I have begun to explore concepts of what can create a 'third space' of exchanges. The exchanges are to be connected by paths, or as Irigaray writes, bridges, without eroding one or the other side, but by accepting the space between two individuals as welcomed 'air' -- space in which to breathe, and grow. (2002) The following outlines some 'bridges' that third space entails, called: wonder, mystery and consciousness, which may begin to form ideas about this in-between.

As Luce Irigaray writes in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984/1993), René Descartes rightfully asserted that we must return to our first passion: **wonder,** in order to arrive at an ethics of sexual difference. As one of the few terms without a direct 'opposite', *wonder* allows both women and men to feel as though they are encountering something for the first time, where nothing can be substituted for the other (Irigaray, 1984/1993*)*. This first passion, takes place in both the heart and in the mind, rather than preferring one, thus overlooking the mind/body dichotomy, allowing us to experience sets of emotions that move the spirit and nourish our souls. *Wonder* enables our perception to our surroundings to heighten, where we become aware of our senses and achieve an understanding of our faculties without prioritizing them, as is a tendency in a society focused and dependant on visual and tactile stimuli.

As for that which is not tangible, the dialectic on sexual difference in design requires respect of the **mystery** of the unknown. Irigaray (2000, 13) writes that "[b]etween us is something which will never be mine or yours", where the 'in-between' allows all subjects to acknowledge their contributions, as well as those of others, even though they may not fully understand them. *Mystery* allows the 'third space' to present itself, boundless. An 'intersubjectivity' is needed to attain and understanding of the 'bridging'. That is, a recognition of others as subjects, rather than as objects, a tendency in Western thought; thus placing other methods and individuals on a horizontal plane, rather than in a vertical hierarchy. The latter is also essential to move beyond conversation in the binary tradition. (Cavallaro, 2003; Irigaray, 2002)

Finally, a **consciousness** or silence in which to breathe and design is necessary in 'third space'. To articulate this, I borrow Catherine Ingraham's statement that "written words are an image of speech" (1998) and let Luce Irigaray 'speak':

> As for the relation with the other, it can only exist if each one has the capacity to remain in oneself and to be conscious of what is proper to oneself.
> Not as a claim to a truth and a work of universal value but as a differentiated and limited world that wants to be recognized, as is recognized the world of the other in the limits of its differentiation, of its difference. ...
> This space is not emptiness but a silence deliberately safeguarded for the task that the relation with the other represents.
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> (*my formatting,* Irigaray, 2002, 87-88)

To be able to address plurality in an increasing globalized world, as designers we need to be aware of the differences between potential users, while seeking to give equal opportunity of access, rather than hoping for a universal sameness. This paper suggests two ways in which feminist readings can contribute to exchanges on this topic. First, we must address the issues of binary opposition which prevent the design professions from moving forward into an inclusive future. And second, the space between various tools, methods, and individuals must be 'bridged' rather than packed with solid 'fill'. I have suggested three ways of approaching the sharing of this 'third space', through: wonder, mystery and consciousness. Evidently, this working paper is but the beginning of the formulation of a 'third space' in which women and men, and man and woman can think, discuss and create. Where disconnections between listening and functioning, thinking and doing, writing and designing have become commonplace in design disciplines, theories on sexual differences may act as mediators both from within, and on the exterior of the present concerns. However, the 'between-space' that is not currently embraced in our cultures needs to become a norm of prioritization within a dialogue.

Three tools: wonder, mystery and consciousness not only address the need for a re-evaluation of self within the fast-paced society in which we live, but also seek to achieve an understanding of what is missing in current generic design. The overall hope is that the work will contribute to conversations on the inclusion of women as *true* 'users' and designers of urban space in order to enable my (currently, careful and selective) city wanderings and creations, as one of many women, to be boundless.

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