

# WOMEN AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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*A course for students in the Masters of Architecture and Planning Program at the Technical University of Nova Scotia, Halifax*

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*Carolyn Wallace (centre) and Maria Somjen (right) in conversation with former student Kathleen Robbins. (Photo: Paul Toman, TUNS)*

**I**n 1984, a group of women consisting of architectural students, practising architects, and local artists decided to meet regularly to read articles about art and architecture with a feminist theme. Each week a different member of the group would suggest a reading for discussion. It was from these grass roots beginnings that the course "Women and the Built Environment" evolved and became an official entry in the calendar of the School of Architecture and Planning at Technical University of Nova Scotia (TUNS).

Having been asked to instruct the course, my first plan of attack was to approach Sherry Ahrentzen, a faculty member at the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of Wisconsin who had recently published an article about a similar

course in *Women and the Environment* magazine. Ahrentzen sent us an outline with the names of others who taught similar courses: Rochele Martin, Chris Cook, Susan Saegert, and Canadians Gerda Werkele and Rebecca Peterson.

The TUNS course structure is similar to others in that it provides a general survey of women in the roles of creators, consumers, and critics of the built environment. The objective of the course is to create an awareness of the built environment as a feminist issue. Although many references are provided to the students taking the course, the main texts are *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective*, edited by Susanna Torre, and *Redesigning the American Dream*, by Dolores Hayden.

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*By Maria Somjen*

Students at the TUNS School of Architecture and Planning examine a model of the conceptual design for the new GST building, designed by Carol Rogers, an architect with Public Works Canada. (Photo: Paul Toman, TUNS)



The course is composed of three parts, based on the roles described above. In addition, an introduction to the course surveys the women's movement and culminates with an explanation of feminism as a discipline of study. Carolyn Wallace and I do this quick survey because we have students who come from diverse backgrounds: this introduction attempts to put the students on an equal footing.

The first part of the course, "Women as Producers of the Built Environment," is a series of lectures and presentations by students which surveys the unacknowledged role of women in the production of architecture. Traditionally, history and theory courses in architecture follow a standard approach which deals with great men, great monuments or great movements and totally ignores the roles and contributions of women. When American Modernism or the European movements are analyzed, women — even those notable by virtue of the fact that they worked alone, as was the case with architects Julia Morgan, Eileen Grey, and Eleanor Raymond — are ignored in most textbooks. And when we look at women architects such as Lily Reich, Denise Scott Brown, and Marion Mahoney Griffin, who worked side by side with famous men, their accomplishments are often obscured or discounted because of their associations with these men.

Historically, the design of domestic architecture was considered a role for which women were

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eminently suited. At the same time, domestic architecture was denigrated as not being "serious architecture." For example, one of the women designers most widely mentioned in histories of architectural design is Catherine Beecher, who, though she worked to redesign the American home (particularly the kitchen) within a domestic ideology based on rational principles, did not consider herself an architect. In this first part of the course we attempt to cover

a few individual women architects from various backgrounds, a project which requires diligent research.

The second part of the course explores "Women as Consumers of the Built Environment." Recent scholarship has shown that women and men seem to have fundamental differences in the way they perceive, experience, and interpret the built environment. The "man-made" environment embodies patriarchal values and implies definitions of the role of women in society. Two topics, "Women and Housing" and "Women and Public Space," are considered in this part of the course. Cooperative living as a means for increasing women's options in the domestic sphere was emphasized in the first of these sections this year, and incorporated a criticism of existing designs for housing as antithetical to the emancipation of women. Cooperative utopias, both theoretical and actual, in Canada, the United States, and England were analyzed and criticized. We studied such diverse projects as the Oneida Perfect-



An exhibition of Women in Architecture and Planning held in November 1991 at the School of Architecture and Planning featured the works of architects Paula Costello, Sharon Fodo, Teresa Janik, and Carol Rogers; graduate architects Jennifer Corson and Brenda Webster; architecture students Wanda Felt and Karen Keddy; and planning student Golsa Soraya. (Photo: Paul Toman, TUNS)

ionist Community, working class cooperative housing in Cape Breton, and the communes of the late 1960s. We also took field trips to a Parent Resource Centre in a public housing project and to a newly constructed shelter for battered women in a small Nova Scotia community.

In ancient Athens there was a sharp division between the public space of the *polis* (city) and the private realm of the household. It excluded from the city centre women and those who did not fit the definition of the ideal state of citizenship. It is interesting to note that architecture based on the classical Greek style has continued to be the architecture of democracy and government buildings up to this day, and that the public/private split still serves to exclude women from the public sphere. Public places still control women's lives, not only symbolically, but also physically by their lack of safety, transportation, and amenities, and their offensive advertisements and alienation. One of the most enlivening and controversial discussions in this section occurred when consumer representatives of the Grace Maternity Hospital planning committee explained their structural isolation as a result of being the only non-medical persons on the committee.

The final section of the course, "Women as Critics," also deals with politics and theory. It offers not only discussions about women such as Jane Jacobs and Catherine Bauer, both voices of conse-

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quence in the field of criticism, but also discussions on the shape that architecture might take in response to feminist values and principles. In biology, psychology, philosophy, and art we are used to distinguishing between male and female elements. In architecture, as in other fields of science and technology, principles have been considered neutral with respect to gender. Architecture dominated by male values to the exclusion of female values results in a discrepancy between the social and

psychological needs of all people, and between the planned and built environment.

This past year we had an even number of female and male students taking the course. This, in combination with the diverse backgrounds of the students, generates lively discussions, although the students with stronger backgrounds in women's studies generally participated more actively.

Originally, the course was listed under *Ideology and Architecture* in the academic calendar, and I taught the course by myself the first year. In the subsequent years there was a course actually called "Ideology in Architecture" taught by Carolyn Wallace, in which she did one lecture on feminism. For the last two years we have taught "Women and the Built Environment" together, which makes it less onerous for us, since we also work full time as designers. It has also been less isolating for us, as there are no full-time women members of the faculty at the School of Architecture. We have attempted

to teach the course on feminist principles by promoting cooperation and the diminution of hierarchy. This has resulted in students bringing readings to us and developing a camaraderie which allows women students to express some of the frustrations they experience in a faculty which has no women professors.

Students are required to write four reaction papers, short responses to the required readings which might include useful personal insights, links to other ideas, contradictions, and similarities. The readings allow women to recognize and discuss painful issues, such as sexist treatment received during work terms. Each student also

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conducts a major project in which theoretical research and applied analysis are undertaken. Some of the topics by students have been "A Look at Intergenerational Relations at a Day-Care in a Senior's Centre," "Women's Housing: Shelter in a Patriarchal Society," and "The Issue of Control and the Birthing Process and Conditions for Nurses at the Grace Maternity Hospital."

This year, in addition to the "Women and the Built Environment" course outlined above, and in conjunction with it, we have organized an exhibition of work by women architects and planners from the local area.