

# Introduction

## Women and Space: Perspectives on Cultural Practices and Change

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This issue of *Architecture & Behaviour* looks at women/environment relationships with a special emphasis on social and cultural changes. Our intention is to go beyond a static portrait of women's role in the production of space, an inventory of women's spatial needs, or an examination of the mechanisms by which the environment acts in the reproduction of gender relations. We do not aim either at presenting an overview of women/environment research. Our goal is far more modest. We intend to present an analysis of cultural change resulting from the women's movement and to show examples of on-site in-progress changes that are being negotiated in everyday life - with more or less conscious political claims -, from the point of view of those who gave themselves a voice despite contextual resistance and opposition.

So defined, this examination of social transformations, and of research practices that are used for such studies, constitutes a new approach to the understanding of culture as experienced in everyday life, suggesting that macro-social phenomena may not be acting alone on people's actions and meanings. There is a culture of creation and transformation which relies on dominated and marginal social entities. The counter-ideology, implicit in this perspective - although often underestimated or ignored in people/environment research -, is very active. In fact, all the papers presented in this issue indicate that an "action-culture" exists and is well alive in margins of the official culture, and that, despite the appearances, marginal actions produce changes (Chombart de Lauwe, 1983).

The papers by Zineb Benzerfa-Guerroudj and by Moshira El-Rafey explore the changes brought by women in developing countries in relationship to women's movement and the dominant patriarchal institutions of Muslim societies. Their respective studies reveal some of the strategies by which women have transformed the use and appropriation of domestic and urban space, thus reinterpreting their own culture. The paper by Clara Greed, in a perspective advocating equal rights for men and women, looks at how these latter, by their very simple presence, could contribute to redefining the English profession of surveyors - traditionally reserved for men - and, indirectly, shaping the environment. By respectively focusing on Lesbian women and men in domestic space rather than on women in traditional gender roles, both Wolfe's and Filioli & Welzer-Lang's papers call our attention to the social construction of gender relations, and to the negotiation processes implied in questioning traditional gender categories. Although the existence of Lesbian and domestic male cultures with their particular spatial practices are acknowledged, it is mostly the relationship between these marginal groups and those against which they define or position themselves that indicates how cultural change takes place.

Without ignoring the specificity of each paper in this issue, a certain number of ideas filter through the texts, building up a coherent discourse about change. Two

points deserve particular attention: 1) the transformation of theoretical perspectives and research practices required to undertake studies about change; 2) the directions of cultural transformations affecting today's gender relations in different cultural contexts.

All the papers presented question the dominant theoretical perspectives in people/environment research, particularly the lack of integration between studies exploring either micro-social or macro-social phenomena, the enduring character of interactionalist models and their understanding of the environment, and the rigidity of certain fundamental concepts. Along with some epistemological reflections undertaken in feminist studies, but also more generally in social studies (for instance the work of Anthony Giddens, 1984), the papers all indicate the importance of linking the observation of individual and group practices to social structures and ideologies - the opposite is also true -, defining the context in which they are inscribed (see Després, 1989; Lawrence, 1989). Indeed, women's experiences - or, for that matter, all human experience - of the built environment can neither be investigated from an exclusively micro-social perspective which assumes that women are in full control of their actions and meanings, nor from an exclusively macro-social perspective which suggests in a deterministic way that they are dominated and shaped by social structures. In their respective papers, El-Rafey, Filiod & Welzer-Lang, and Benzerfa-Guerroudj articulate people's practices - men or women - with social phenomena such as women's movement and broader social structures to fully understand the transformations they observed. This is also how Greed questions how women could transform a professional practice while trained within its own values and visions. Wolfe adds a diachronic dimension to the integration of micro- and macro-social phenomena: like Foucault proceeds with the archeology of various social constructions, she traces back in history the construction of Lesbians' identity and the relationship between their practices and the social milieu in which they are marginalized.

All the studies presented also implicitly criticize the relative symmetry between people and environment, at the heart of the interactionist models. If it is true that the built environment, as an objective reality embodying social norms with some enduring quality, acts as a mnemonic device and contributes to the maintenance of social order (Rapoport, 1982), the message can also be rejected in many different ways and, furthermore, new practices can take place without any modifications to the built environment. In fact, it seems as if experience is not always inscribed in the built space, particularly among dominated individuals and groups who have emancipated practices.

Regarding methodology, all papers look at the reality under study "from the interior". Researchers include their own experiences of these realities, - leaving aside the expected neutrality of the researcher - which seem to enrich their interpretations rather than prevent it. In line with feminist research, they claim a politicized science, a science which promotes social change and the liberation of practices (Wolfe and Greed in particular).<sup>1</sup> Finally, the authors focus on marginal subjects which may, at first sight, appear of little interest to mainstream researchers. However, it is precisely because marginal subjects are sources of social change and generate questioning about social relations that they allow to observe social creativity in action as well as the changes resulting from it.

<sup>1</sup> In this respect, we have to acknowledge the interest for participation and action research in environmental feminist research (for a more detailed discussion, see Després and Piché, 1992).

Regarding the directions of cultural transformations affecting gender relations, the results of the different studies presented in this issue show several similarities, despite the diversity of their contexts. Firstly, gender relations of domination are still omnipresent and resistance to change very much active. Even when influenced by feminist ideas, men's behaviours described by Filiod & Welzer-Lang suggest that, in reclaiming part of the domestic domain, men position themselves as dominators: they do *haute cuisine* while women cook, they clean "rationally" only when the house is dirty while women clean in anticipation of a dirty home. The researchers themselves even reestablish a male hierarchy about the observed gender differences, qualifying the feminine order as being "static" and the masculine one as "dynamic".

Secondly, these studies contribute to the questioning, sometimes reinterpretation of several concepts and social categories commonly used in people/environment research. The examination of change seems to destabilize some of the binary categories such as men/women, private/public, private-women/public-men. Without concluding that these categories are totally irrelevant, a rather large permeability is noticeable between the opposite ends of these dichotomies: Benzerfa-Guerroudj observes women in public spaces in a Muslim context where they are mostly confined to domestic space, Filiod & Welzer-Lang observe men in domestic space, a context traditionally associated with women, and Wolfe describes Lesbian bars - public places - with the character of private places.

The make-up of men/women relations is shown under a new light. The popular notion of gender, first used in English, now in French instead of *rapports de sexe*, underlines the social construction of this concept while hiding the sexual character of this relation and the social construction of sexuality itself. In fact, men and women in space do not have symmetrical relations, as we like to characterize them in traditional space. The covering and the veiling of women's body in the Muslim world, women's fight against violence, and the malaise still generated by the expression of homosexuality indicate the extent to which gender relations are strongly sexual. By covering their bodies and veiling their faces, women are making themselves sexually invisible, so are Lesbian women going to invisible bars and avoiding going out at night because their sexuality is an object of domination. These examples suggest that sexuality, as produced by and instrument of power, needs to be integrated in feminist studies.

The ways the environment is perceived as well as appropriated in these papers is rather intriguing. With the exception of El-Rafey's, none of the studies looks at appropriation practices to produce better designs; the richness of what is being observed being the appropriation behaviours themselves. Thus, for the households in Filiod & Welzer-Lang's study, the negotiation process engaged for social spaces and territories within the home is far more important than the making of the space itself. In the case of the Lesbians described by Wolfe, the experience of bars - underground and ephemeral - is made through ambiance and people rather than through the space itself. Similarly, Algerian women find ways to have less restricted access to public space by transforming themselves rather than transforming the space; the appropriation is made possible through the use of the veil, that is, through invisibility.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The Islamic women's movement is divided on the meaning that should be given to this practice: for some, it is a strategy of appropriation and liberation; for others, a return to confinement practices (Hélie-Lucas, 1991).

Thirdly, the collective portrait drawn by the texts brings new light on the strategies used for producing change and appropriating power. Most of these strategies cannot be easily considered as "liberating", since they often contribute to maintaining the socio-spatial division of genders and women's invisibility. It is the case of: the marking of male and female domains in Egyptian homes (El-Rafey); the veiling of Algerian women in public spaces (Benzerfa-Guerroudj); the use of invisible bars by American Lesbians (Wolfe); and the marginalization of women in the profession of surveyors in England (Greed). This suggests, on the one hand, that the asymmetry of gender relations makes women's claims and the transformation of male behaviours reinforce existing relations of domination. On the other hand, one should not deny that women, in transforming their spaces or bypassing the rules to meet their daily needs, are building up skills through repetitive cycles of action and reflection; in doing so, they are empowering themselves, contributing to their political consciousness and actions (Geldman & Stall, forthcoming). The action research by which Lesbians attempt to reconstruct their own history (Wolfe) is maybe the best example of a strategy which, with no immediate impact on the right to space, contributes to an individual and collective feeling of control about an otherwise oppressive reality.

All the texts presented are amazingly silent about what the changes they describe and which are taking place in everyday life are aiming to. The changes are not discussed within a global cultural project which would ignore the complexity of social relations and the dynamic qualities of change. Doing so, the authors avoid the contemporary debate among feminist researchers about the different ways of defining equality such as the equality of rights, the search for androgyny, the accentuation of male/female differences. The object of research being culture in action, one might ask if any discussion of these models is necessary. In fact, none of them seems to fit the studies presented in this issue. For instance, Filiot & Welzer-Lang's research indicates that the model of androgyny can be experienced with great difficulty even among emancipated couples while Wolfe's suggests that "being different" is not any easier.

It is also without nostalgia or preconceived ideas that some texts deal with the relationship between tradition and change. To the extent where relations of domination between men and women are inscribed in all dimensions of a culture, changing them implies a redefinition of existing ideologies, lifestyles, and environments. This does not necessarily mean that the results will be a homogeneous culture since, as El-Rafey demonstrated, it is possible to reinterpret culture without rejecting modernization, which can ease women's lives and, more generally, help redefine gender relations.

We can conclude that the postmodern praise of plurality and diversity is very present in the variety of the strategies put together to reconstruct the identity of marginal groups and modify gender relations, as well as in the variety of ends pursued in the context of people's everyday lives. However, we are talking about an acknowledgement of a social pluralism that fights relations of domination, which is often neglected or ignored in postmodern discourse. The results of the papers presented in this issue suggest that the modern emphasis on power and domination is still needed in feminine research.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

see last page of Introduction in French, above