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# A Room of One's Own: A Case for Women's Architecture

*Giovanna Peel*

*Giovanna Peel, designer de maisons, parle du besoin pour la femme de créer elle-même son propre espace.*

In most preliterate cultures, women made shelter — and this is natural when one considers it was, and still is, women who make the greatest use of dwellings. The houses these women built were nurturing wombs of great simplicity where they gave birth, nurtured, lived and died.

These dwellings were often of great beauty due to an intuitive understanding of functionalism which we must not confuse with the functionalism shown in modern architecture.

The skyscraper, for example, with its glass walls and zooming elevators is oblivious to climate, and energy consumption. Its stark, repetitive floor planning results in unyielding, structural requirements which tend

to ignore the diversity of purposes going on within.

A far cry from these megaliths of the post-industrial world are the villages of the Transvaal. Built by the South African Ndebele women they reflect a true respect for functionalism. Comparatively humble, these buildings nevertheless are practical and creative. Since these houses are seldom inhabited by the men and children of the Ndebele (both preferring more public spaces) they can truly be called a 'room of one's own.'

When building became 'architecture' in response to climatic, economic and cultural factors, the house naturally, became less intimate and functional. It became more symbolic. Seldom did it reflect the practical exigencies of its clients, women. This is not to suggest that beautiful and even meaningful buildings ceased to be built after architecture became a 'profession.'

But when we survey the field we find that aesthetics in male architec-

ture never comes into question, simply because we have little to compare it with. As in medicine, law, government and religion, architecture has been a male preserve.

A basic lack of time and a mind occupied with childrearing were serious deterrents to women participating in any profession. It is women, in fact who by undertaking survival tasks, have freed men to create art, to study religion and to make war.

We can, of course, speculate about how the architectural language of women would have developed during the hiatus between the preliterate age and our own. There are a few scattered examples which demonstrate our ability as architects, but too few from which to extrapolate.

Would women have followed the style popular among male architects? The language they might have developed would incorporate the impact of the psychological, emo-

tional and spatial requirements of women in the planning and designing of buildings.

The extent to which male architects have considered these issues can be assessed if we examine a typical, modern city apartment. The kitchen, basically a laboratory for food preparation, and usually little bigger than a cupboard, is often relegated to the north side of the building, and is often windowless.

If we calculate the amount of time a homemaker spends in the kitchen, we find it constitutes the greater part of her waking day. But what compensation does the male architect offer her? It needs to be a spacious, well-planned area. But the planners give little consideration to its principal occupant and to the function of the room. Nevertheless, it does reflect the hierarchy of the family.

The relationship between space distribution and the importance of family members is seen elsewhere in dwellings. Livingrooms purport to be places for living but hardly anybody lives there, save a man when he is home. School age children work in their bedrooms or are delegated to the kitchen table, that is, if there is enough room in the kitchen for a table.

The living room is presumably for talking but needs no more than roughly 10 feet in diameter for normal conversation. Yet the desirability and consequently the rent of an apartment increases with the size (not utility) of the livingroom, instead of the kitchen.

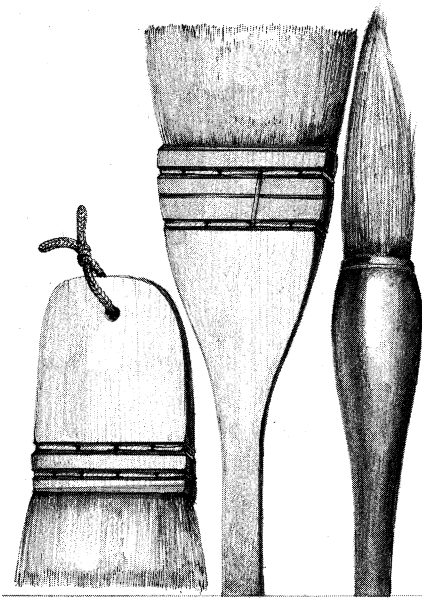
Never, in centuries, has architecture taken into account the life of women. In houses created for women by men, there is no place for recreation, thinking, writing or painting; not so much as a small corner for a meditative moment; not an area for physical development; nor space for the storage and use of intellectual tools like a library.

Instead, we have been put into an architectural prison, decorated with lace or technological toys, depending on the spirit of the times. We have been sold efficiency to save time but have not been given the space that would make adequate use of it.

If women built houses, they would take into account the plurality of human activities. As yet, male architects have failed to acknowledge their own latent abilities and merely support the male idea that work is solely connected with remunerative jobs *outside* the home. The creativity of the housewife is never taken seriously.

What architects have created for women are suburban dormitories where creative potential is forever poured onto yellowing kitchen floors. Architects fail to see that the diversity of people's potential supplies a challenge for creative solutions.

We have trusted the architect and urban planner, people trained in macro-concepts, to take charge of micro-mosaics — emotions and activities that domestic spaces either enhance or inhibit. Our lives are not only influenced by the space in which we live but space determines, to a great extent, the way in which we move. Without free movement there is no knowledge of our body and its potential.



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Women have been traditionally in charge of the endless details that housekeeping and child-rearing entail. We are, therefore, more capable of orchestrating the varied emotional and physical language of domestic space. How then, did we come to relinquish the power to determine our own space? Probably

in the same way that medical doctors appropriated child-delivery from the mid-wives. It became lucrative and 'professional.'

It is time now, for us, as clients, designers and architects, to regain control and care of our own space. In doing so, we may rediscover our very own way of life. As architects, we have a place in the creation of domestic space, provided we are willing to *listen* carefully.

As a designer, working in the field of architecture for the past ten years, I make it a point to listen to the often confused, but emotionally relevant description of women's dreams before drafting a house plan. Invariably the client encircles the air with her hands, spinning space like a long repressed desire. She makes tender gestures of enclosure in which she sees herself nurtured and defined.

It is difficult to incorporate those inspired gestures into a language which as yet, has no vocabulary. Perhaps Virginia Gray, an architect working in New Mexico, has found this new vocabulary in the reconstruction of adobe houses. Her work has resulted in a movement to promote a return to a more earthly and humble architecture.

Gray brings a personal vision to her adobe house, which follows a path to inner definition of self. The adobe house is a symbolic gesture tying together a long dormant tradition of women as builders.

What Gray is doing will not be lost. It points to a gentler, more spiritual approach to concrete and steel and a rebirth of human values amidst the clamour of brutalizing construction and male aesthetic colonization.

This should be our point of departure. We should be neither timid nor hesitant. Both as clients and as architects, we have first-hand knowledge of domestic space as prison (and as castle). It seems only natural then, that we must move into this profession, that has forgotten how to love the dweller.

1 *Needed: A Room with a View*,  
Giovanna Peel

2 *Three Hake Brushes*, Giovanna Peel