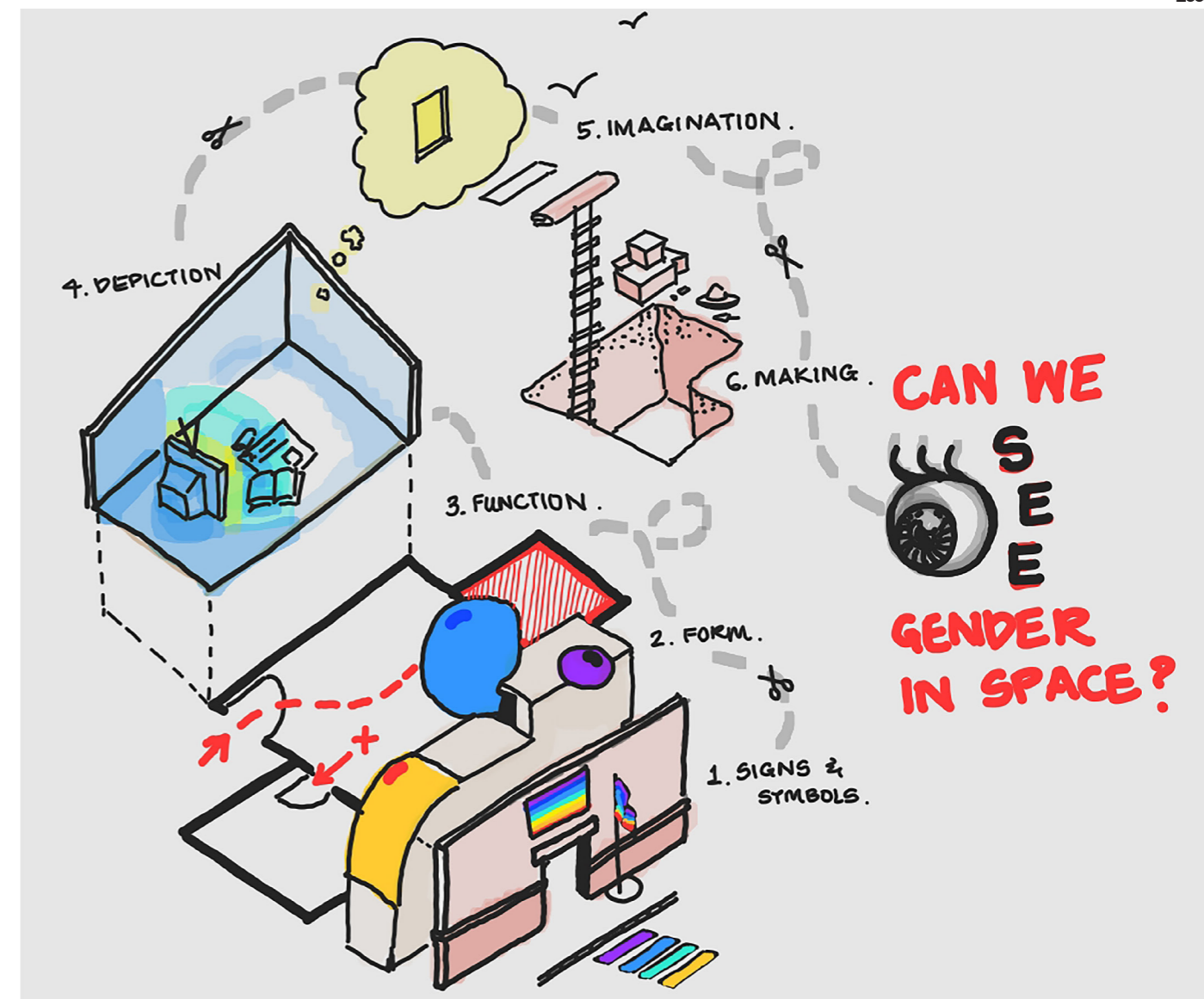


DOES SPACE HAVE GENDER?

Kaushik Conversations on identity conditions like gender often open in the context of law and policy. The law is a good place to begin because it is a system constructed to define societal operation. In other fields of knowledge as well, we encounter gender in the “laws” that govern the field - contextualising questions of identity here opens up the possibility of critiquing its foundational systems (Butler, 1990). By situating the self and asking “What is gender? Who constructs it, and for whom?” we are forced to navigate its intersecting influences and impact on our lived reality.

In 2021, in the spirit of this vague open question (and as a consequence of existential spiralling) I asked the people around me, Does Architectural Space have Gender?

The following notes are laid out from various responses and more emergent questions - from architecture students, professors, field researchers and practitioners of cis and trans gender positions. It is presented in a manner that strips back layers of the space: from the symbols that adorn it, to its form, its function, its depiction, imagination and making, to understand



Peeling back layers of the architectural space.

Signs and Symbols

We begin, as many-a-conversation on inclusion does, with an image of a rainbow-coloured street crossing. Painted on the dark tarmac of city centres under pedestrian footfall, these gestures are more permanent forms of the queer pride flag, a feature of pride parades and one of the most legible and adamant civic gestures towards a gender-inclusive public today. They signify an acceptance and celebration of the queer subject, aiming to foster a public that is accustomed to diversity without erasing or demanding conformity.

Signs and symbols are important in a space. A sign serves to represent various presences and claims to space, as well as an ongoing contestation for the right to occupy. It is a visible marker of an idea that is adopted by coalescing groups into a symbol, which then becomes a marker of identity. For a lot of young queer people, the presence of the rainbow flag can be extremely affirming. It becomes a medium to educate, and material to organise with.

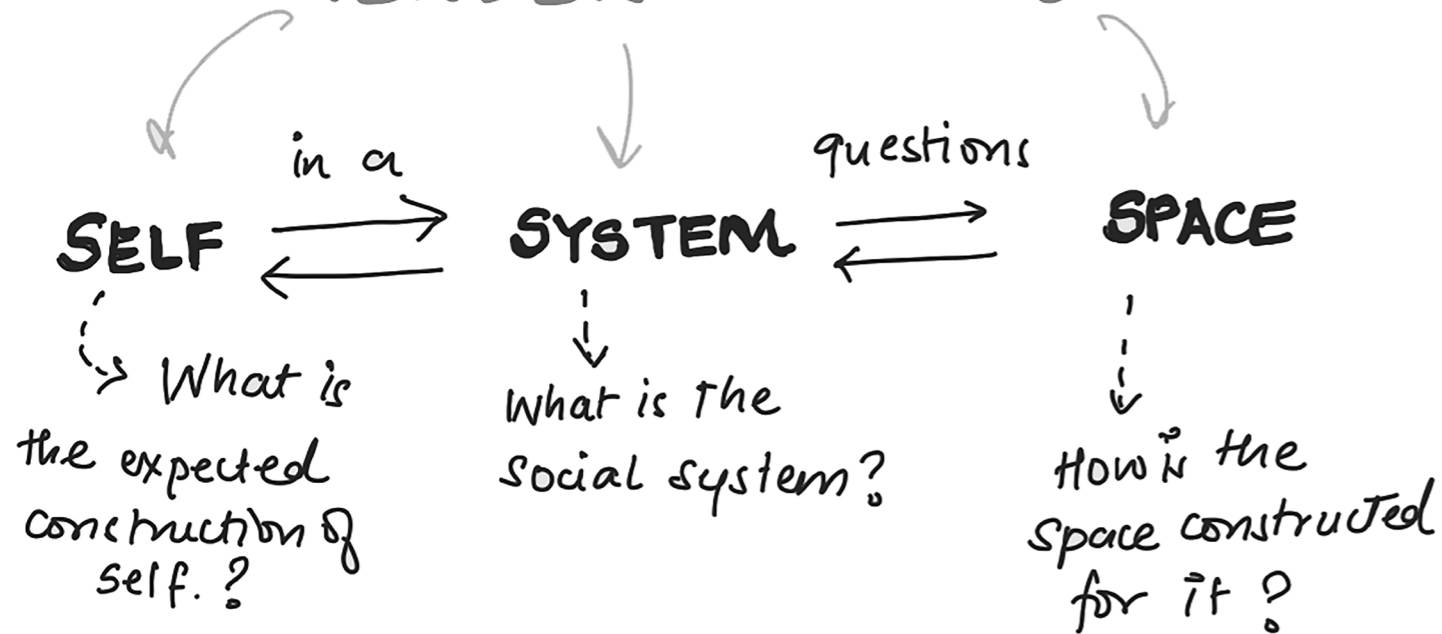
As philosopher Alfred Korzybski states however, “The map is not the territory” - An understanding of the world that is

shaped by abstractions can never fully capture the complex “territories” of reality. Such is also the case with these gestures. While they increase visibility, they do not directly correlate to the absolute realities of safety in these cities, as queer individuals still face systemic and physical violence, from the denial of housing, employment and adequate healthcare, to police brutality and incarcerations (Krishnan, 1998). Against such lived realities, it is possible with purely an examination of symbols to forget the violence of the systems into which such gestures ask that we be included. Is it possible to consider then, the gendering of architectural spaces that extends beyond such markers?

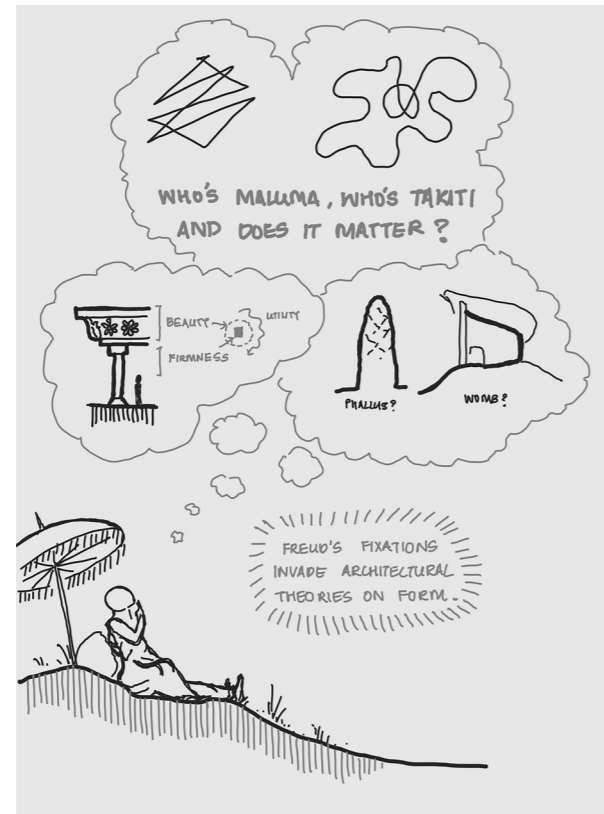
Form

Building on Gestalt theorist Wolfgang Kohler’s sound symbolism theories, two shapes were presented - one with straight sharp lines, another with curvilinear form. Is one markedly female and the other male? Architectural descriptions of form are also riddled with these connotations, from Vitruvian principles of firmness or structure associated with masculinity and beauty or ornament with femininity, to descriptions of tower forms to phallic symbolism and caves to wombs.

GENDER INFORMS



Gender informs the self, the system and the space.



Gender categorisation applied to form in architecture veers dangerously towards stereotyping.

144 We paused to challenge the universality of such inferences. Thought experiments like this have proven time and again to be irreplicable across cultural and linguistic contexts. In architecture too, we rarely perceive or conceptualise spaces in this “masc”, “femme” separated manner.

This critique is further enriched by Yael Reisner’s thoughts in Towards Abundance. Reisner, who has a background in both biology and architecture, states that while differences may be seen in the male-female anatomy, form-making is driven by thought, and creative impulse does not present any inherent gender distinctions (Marx, 2023). He argues that these associations have formed from a result of societal conditioning and are not based in evolutionary biology. Judith Butler furthers this by arguing that one must not take nomenclature even with biology as pre-ordained,

as the act of demarcation in biology is a matter of human consideration, governed by societal frameworks of the time (Butler, 1990). We select what to notice as points of distinction, and we decide what to name each side of this distinction.

Anna Heringer’s earthen caverns of METI handmade school serve as a good representation of care and nurturance in built form. When we divorce the association of descriptors such as “care” and “nurturance” to Heringer’s womanhood, we are met with another example - Aldo Van Eyck’s city for children, which stood testament to the same qualities across form, materiality and gender of the architect. Such objectives driven through the built form are therefore not inherently associated with gender, rather a reflection of what society expects each gender to embody.



We have seen soft, fluid architecture in the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao by Frank Gehry, as well as at Amanda Leveté’s project in Lisbon. Conversely, we’ve seen hard, angular architecture from Zaha Hadid in her proposal for the Peak project in Hong Kong. These styles are reflections of diverse creative impulses, not expressions of gender.



Pride Parade in Bangalore; Stonewall Inn, New York City; Rainbow pedestrian crossing in Nashville.

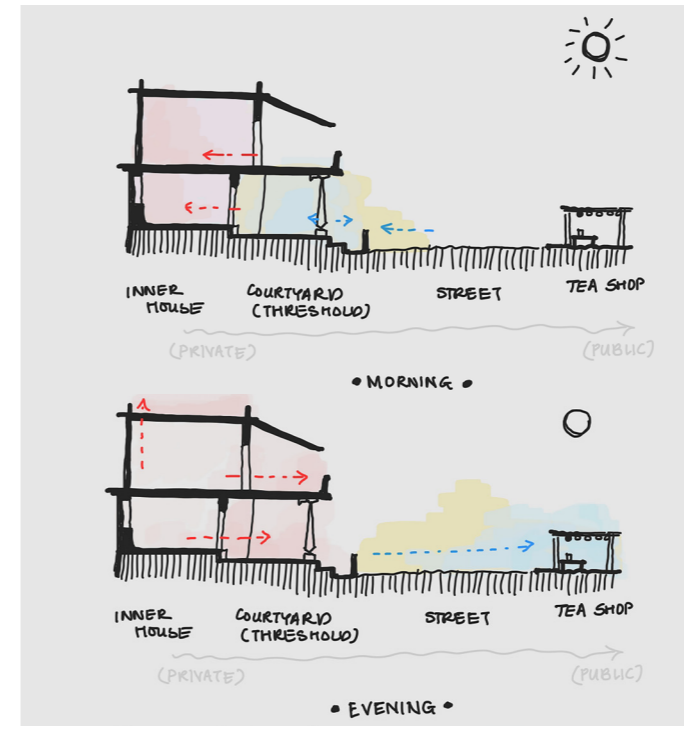


(bottom) Anna Heringer’s METI Handmade School in Bangladesh.

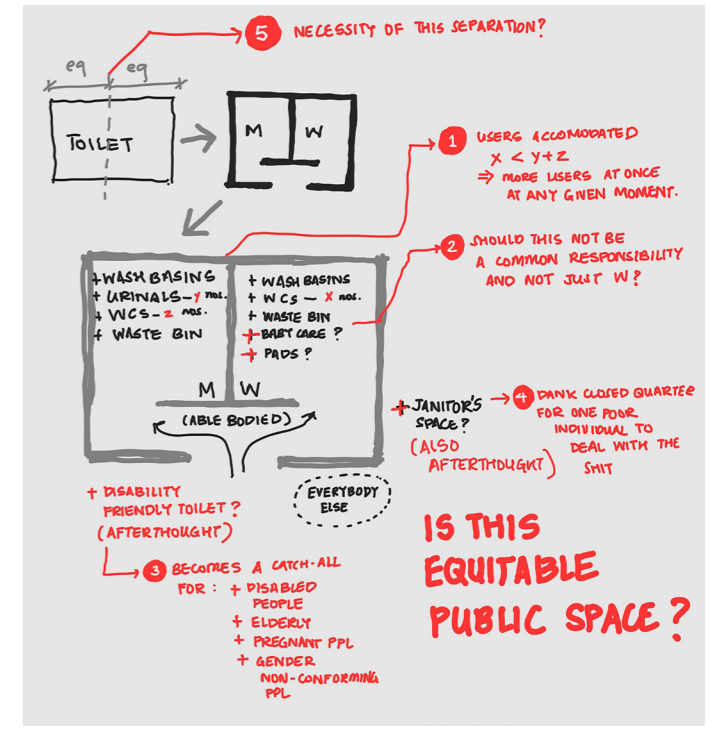




Aldo Van Eyck's Orphanage and Playground in Amsterdam.



Movement of men and women in a Bora household across the day.



Washroom battles – questions raised during the discussion of public washrooms. Examples from metro stations, malls and college were discussed.

Function

Buildings are more than edifices- they are social maps, charting relationships and expectations, embedded into the functions that they are designed for. In the built form, it is easy to identify how these functions are demarcated, by understanding its means of access and separation. When we examine public and private spaces in the evolution of settlements, we find many instances of separation across the gender binary: with public spaces considered as the realm for men, and private and domestic spaces the realm of women. Although this pattern in its more explicit ways is slowly diminishing, it continues to haunt public and domestic spaces implicitly in the ways that they are occupied and designed. Today, be it for work, leisure or transition, women and individuals of other marginalised genders face challenges in occupying public space due to a constant threat of scrutiny, harassment and objectification.

Cis-women and trans people from all walks of life reflected deeply on how this effect is embedded into our collective consciousness. While cis-men in our discussions could often corroborate based on observations and stories heard from their peers, it was not an embodied experience that they could resonate with. A suggestion was made to bridge this, inviting the cis-men in the room

“to walk a day in women’s clothes” to truly understand male gaze. This was met with some laughter, resistance and guarded curiosity.

Contests for visibility in public space reflect deeply embedded societal norms where, although space in a hetero-patriarchal framework may be built around the masculine “ideal”, femininity (in men and women) emerges as a carefully controlled subject of scrutiny. A definition of the masculine “ideal” built on the othering of deviation, leaves cis-men the opportunity to be a flaneur or an unobserved wanderer, while others navigate public space with caution or limited access. This perception of femininity and non-conformity as failures to attain the masculine ideal spares no one - while men navigate their own deviations from masculinity and therefore the fragility of their means of access and control, it subtly shapes public perceptions of others, and influences how individuals navigate through architectural spaces under gendered scrutiny.

Public-private separations operate not only at the city level, but also within the home. In examples of domestic spaces from vernacular architecture in coastal Maharashtra, we observed that the gendering of spaces is woven into the very language used to label different areas of the

house. Even the spatial layout reflects these assignments, with private and “servant” spaces associated with femininity and public-facing and “served” spaces seen as masculine. This cultural layering influences movement within the home, demarcating which genders “belong” in which spaces. Spatial organisation also illuminated how such gender divisions manifest in the neighbourhood. An example was provided from Bora neighbourhoods, where men occupy the front of the home during the day but transition to public spaces such as tea stalls in the evening, allowing women greater access to the more public areas of the home. This temporal shift in spatial use illustrates how access to space can change based on times of day, adapting to the rhythms of daily life while still reinforcing gendered boundaries.

In many stories, thresholds emerged as important sites for questioning, hesitation or conflict for trans people, and those who broke social norms constructed around their given gender. One such story was that of a transwoman who recalled her teenage years sitting at the doorway between the kitchen and the living room, where she could listen to and participate in conversations with other women in her home, while she was expected to present as a man and occupy the “front room”.

Feminist theorists Janet Wolff and Elizabeth Wilson (Wilson, 1992) introduced the concept of the flaneuse as women who subverted gender expectations by crossing this threshold into public life. From sex workers who stood then as some of the first public women, to trans sex workers today, these “flaneuses” reclaim the right to observe public life on their own terms, despite scrutiny. They pave the way for artists and activists who, with this ability, can challenge and redefine gender frameworks that define who can experience freedom and anonymity.

Toilets are an important public utility for those spending extended hours outside the home. More importantly for our discussion, it is a historically persistent site for binary separation - across class, caste, race and gender. Theorists like Joel Sanders demonstrate how spaces like toilets reinforce the hetero-normativity of gender through clever (and now taken-for-granted) organisation of gazes, props, boundaries and finishes (Sanders, 1997). In many cases, the acute shortage of clean accessible toilets for women, trans people and disabled persons has forced many to reluctantly use unclean restrooms, defecate in the open or delay use until they are able to return home, heightening risks of contracting urinary tract infections.

Discussions on the transformation of public restrooms to be equitable brought forth existing and potential directions: increasing the size of women’s washrooms to include more stalls, relocation of baby care rooms to central locations between men’s and women’s rooms and ensuring free and safe access to menstrual care products and disposal systems. A notable case study raised during this conversation was Stalled!, an open-source initiative by Joel Sanders, Susan Stryker and other contributors that provides prototypes for all-gender restroom designs (Stryker & Sanders, 2016).

Space emerges as an important tool in gendered coding. Here we acknowledge how design of spaces may result from a notion of expected function, and later actively work to shape our movement. To quote Simone de Beauvoir, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (de Beauvoir, 1949). We are not born into a set of behaviour patterns, but are coded from very early ages to perform in expected ways. Participants reflected on the disciplining practices and design of their schools - if not entirely separated by gender, still reinforce gender norms through bifurcated assembly lines, uniform and grooming codes, or limits on interaction.

Spaces built to unrevised design codes reinforce this through the design of toilets, locker rooms, hostels - All of which routinely erase homosexuality and exclude trans, non-binary and intersex identities, turning them into aspects of concealment and shame.

We see profound shifts in the design of high-function spaces on the entry of gender diverse architects. Domestic spaces like kitchens become a perfect example of this. Early cis-women who, upon entering the architecture profession in the late industrial era, introduced designs that significantly improved daily household efficiency. We reflected on the evolution of design aids like the kitchen triangle—a layout concept developed by Lillian M Gilbreth in the late 1940s to optimise kitchen efficiency by organising movement between the stove, sink, and refrigerator. This concept was revolutionary for its time, as it addressed the practical needs of kitchen users. These architects understood the demands of domestic labour, designing homes that prioritised comfort, usability, and reduced workloads. Such changes were not a result of a natural “feminine” perspective but rather the outcome of considering lived experience, which allowed these architects

to design with empathy for others who shared similar burdens (Canales, 2023).

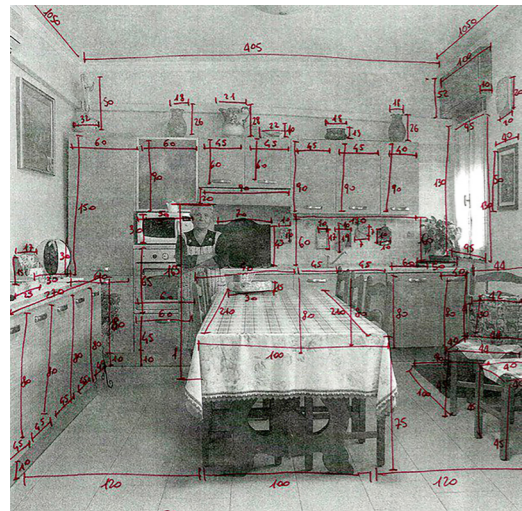
Socialist architects such as Marie Howland and Alice Austin took these imaginations a step further with concepts for cities without private kitchens, opting instead for communal kitchens (Hayden, 1978). As the world progresses well into the 21st century, we see houses shrinking in response to the growing demand for urban space. Kitchenless cities become relevant again, and we see examples of this reality in dense populous cities like Mumbai, Tokyo and New York.

It is noteworthy that this binary construct of power and powerlessness has not been static across history. In classical Greek society, for example, the “ideal” citizen was an older man with voting rights and social authority, while younger men, women, and others were deemed “less than” and excluded from these privileges. This structure built on the intersection of age and (our current understanding of) gender influenced who could inhabit specific areas and the behaviours expected within them.

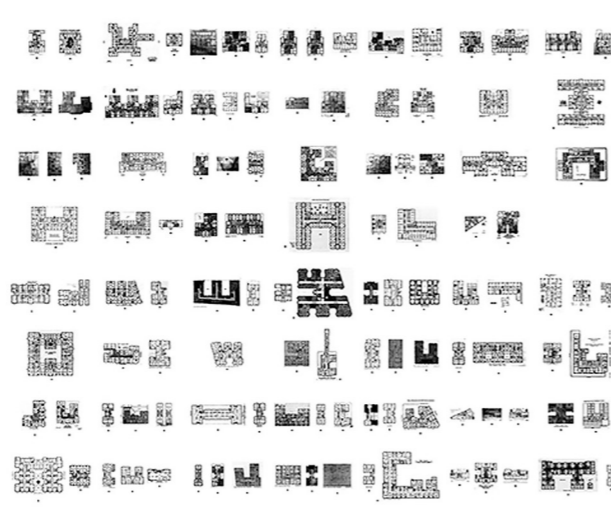
Gender as an influence on space is also not isolated but layered with other social

factors like age and status. In modern Indian society, similar dynamics are seen, where the intersections of caste, class, and age collectively dictate access and authority within spaces. In such settings, power and privilege are also dynamic, changing over a person’s life. Cis-women, for instance, experience shifts in autonomy and authority as they transition through different stages of reproductive years. A young, unmarried woman might have limited freedom in public spaces (menarche), but as she ages beyond menopause her familial authority grows, as seen in the popular “patriarchal mother-in-law” trope of tv serials broadcasted in the country. This shift reflects how the responsibility of carrying patriarchy intertwines age with authority, impacting both men and women of a household (Menon, 2014).

Working-class men in India have been seen to subvert gender expectations of western hetero-masculine normativity — holding hands publicly or painting or grooming individual finger nails (Menon, 2014). These subtleties reveal the fluid non-universal nature of gender hierarchy that requires a multi-layered study of the context and time that the system emerges from.



Lara Agosti’s measured photograph of her grandmother’s kitchen depicts the importance of scale in the kitchen. The dimensions and proportions reveal for whom it is exactly the right size.



Anna Puigjaner’s documentation of apartment floorplans in New York City, part of her project Kitchenless City.



Policemen in Maharashtra holding hands; Kokilaben from the popular television soap Saath Nibhaana Sathiya representing one of many shows that bring forth the mother-in-law trope of being responsible for enforcing patriarchy in the household.



Still from Alai Payuthey. The newlywed couple in their home, where spaces are not rigidly divided by walls but rather suggested through the presence of props and activities that both homeowners partake in.



Still from Killa

Depiction of Space: Film and Media

Film offers layered perspectives on gendered spaces and social structures in India. While we see examples like The Great Indian Kitchen and Paava Kathaigal which demonstrate space as a tool for oppression, we also see space used to imagine the act of release. Alai Payuthey, a film in which a newlywed couple move into a house under construction to make a home together against the will of their families. This courtyard house, apart from its external walls, was loosely divided on the inside with curtains, sarees and other fabrics draped on clotheslines. This single temporary, free-flowing space prompted us to ask ourselves, is this an imagination of a home, free from the division of labour across gender?

(Halberstam, 2020). This theme of finding oneself within unstructured environments is depicted in the Marathi film Killa, which follows a group of children exploring an old fort and its surrounding natural areas. The children’s interactions with these abandoned structures and the wild landscape serve as a metaphor for self-discovery, as they navigate both the ruins and their personal challenges. These open, unbounded spaces contrast with the structured, restrictive environments of traditional homes or schools, allowing the children to freely explore, imagine, and connect with their identities.

Another example from Bangalore is Chandri’s comic, which portrays a trans woman’s experience of finding peace and perspective on her terrace, away from the demands of daily life. This “wild” rooftop space offers her a personal sanctuary, allowing her to reconnect with herself and reflect on a reality beyond societal pressures.

Expanding on the idea of liberated spaces Wild Publics as Jack Halberstam describes, are liberated spaces beyond societal constraints, allowing freedom from surveillance



Examples of Liminal Spaces, machine centered environments.



Andy Warhol’s The Factory; King Ludwig II’s Linderhof Palace in Bavaria



Liminal Space: Neutral Ground?

Humorously, this discussion began with a (mis?) interpretation of the question - “does outer space have gender?”. We spent a little time on structures built in infinite space and then examined liminal spaces, focusing on environments that operate outside social constructs. Certain machine-centred environments, such as airport terminals, create a neutral setting that paradoxically excludes all individuals by design, unintentionally making them truly neutral in their status as “no-man’s-land”.

Shows like Stranger Things depict ‘mall rats’—young people reclaiming these liminal spaces as places for loitering, socialising, and adventure. This illustrates how space can result from people repurposing spaces for self-expression and community, beyond the commercial intentions of their design.

We see reclamation as a recurring practice in queer spaces. Documentaries like Paris is Burning and shows like Pose depict spaces in the late 1980s reclaimed by New York’s QPOC community, reclaiming structures like warehouses, malls and port sides for finding love and community. The “ballroom” was one such secret performative space built into abandoned basements and warehouses. These served as stages for drag contests and dance-offs, movements for self-expression and gender parody (Livingston, 1990).

Other-worldly environments can also be intentionally created

to subvert expectations on what a space must normally present as, like Andy Warhol’s Factory, or the archetype of nightclubs, clearly marking removal through their design. History records palaces like that of Ludwig II, designed to remove its inhabitants from public scrutiny and protect them with a physical barrier. A particularly evocative account from Bangalore is Begum Mahal, a mansion once owned by Begum Akhtar, who opened her home to the trans community in solidarity with her Kothi child. On Friday nights, this mansion became a sanctuary for the trans community and other “little people” of the area, where they would gather to drink, smoke, and dance to item songs. The mansion provided a liberating space shielded from societal judgement, allowing free expression. The mansion was mysteriously burned down in the early 2000s, and the loss of such an inclusive, safe space continues to be lamented by the community (Harish, Mohan, Raj, & Mangai, 2019).

In contrast, on the opposite side of the street was a shanty belonging to another trans woman who also offered shelter but was often ridiculed for her “shabby appearance” and dismissed. This woman, however, responded defiantly to her mockers by tossing water pots at those who jeered at her. This juxtaposition of Begum Mahal and the modest shanty underscores a key point raised in Wild Publics. Halberstam suggests that “removals to the beyond tend to operate within their own relations to power; the ability to enclose any space from a private home to a sovereign palace is one already based on ownership and stature.” This dynamic



Snapshots from Times Will Pass, Chandri’s comic, released by Aravani Art Project.



Begum Mahal was both a woman and her house.

Begum Mahal, its erstwhile location to the south of Ulsoor Lake, Bengaluru.

shows that while architecture can create sanctuary-like spaces for marginalised individuals, the ability to maintain and protect these spaces often depends on social standing and ownership.

Making of Space: Profession and Practice

The gender dynamics within architectural education and professional practice reveal a stark contrast between aspiration and reality. While women constitute a substantial portion of architecture students, their representation diminishes sharply in professional settings. Systemic barriers, including wage gaps and limited career advancement, hinder their participation and progress. This disparity often leads to isolation, as echoed by practitioners describing exclusive, “boys’ club” atmospheres in professional gatherings, discouraging women from pursuing architecture as a long-term career.

This exclusion is not new; its roots lie in historical movements that shaped the perception of architectural greatness. For instance, the New York Five contributed greatly to the commodification of architecture in the US by aligning themselves with influential allies in advertising, positioning architecture as a product of cultural prestige rather than practical self-building. This shift contributed to the elitist perception of architecture, sidelining common and marginalized voices in the expression of architecture. This perception continues in educational curricula, where well-advertised, out-of-the-box ideas are valued over intuitive skill.

In theory, figures like Denise Scott Brown, despite significant contributions, are overshadowed by male counterparts like Robert Venturi, Le Corbusier or Louis Kahn. While we noted the absence of emphasis on these figured, the call made was not for just token inclusions of marginalized voices in architectural history, but meaningful engagement with their

ideas to enrich the field.

In practice, biases persist in studios and on construction sites. Cis-women and marginalized people often face scepticism about their expertise, prompting them to “code-switch” or adapt their behaviour to fit traditional expectations of authority. Hierarchies on construction sites reinforce these biases, with “skilled” labour dominated by men and support roles relegated to women. This unequal division of labour limits access to higher-paying, respected roles for others and raises questions about what we define as “skill” in construction.

Trans and gender-nonconforming individuals face compounded invisibility due to the lack of representation and mentorship within the profession. Addressing these gaps requires cultivating safe, inclusive and equitable environments that actively challenge biases through increased visibility, awareness and respect for gender variance.

Collaborative practices offer a vision for a more inclusive and socially responsive

architecture that empower gender diverse groups. Yasmeen Lari’s work in disaster-affected regions of Pakistan exemplifies this shift. By partnering with rural women to build 80,000 chulahs (clay stoves), she demonstrates how collective action, built on embodied building practices learned over generations can redefine architecture.

Formal collectives like Matha Chaj empower women by transforming traditional techniques into recognised skill in construction. Drawing from the guild’s textile skills Matha Chhaj moves traditional weaving practices into the realm of thatch-roof construction, empowering women as both creators and collaborators in architecture. The Aravani Art Project, a collective of trans women creating murals in Bangalore, brings visibility to marginalized communities by enriching urban spaces with their distinct treatment of colour.

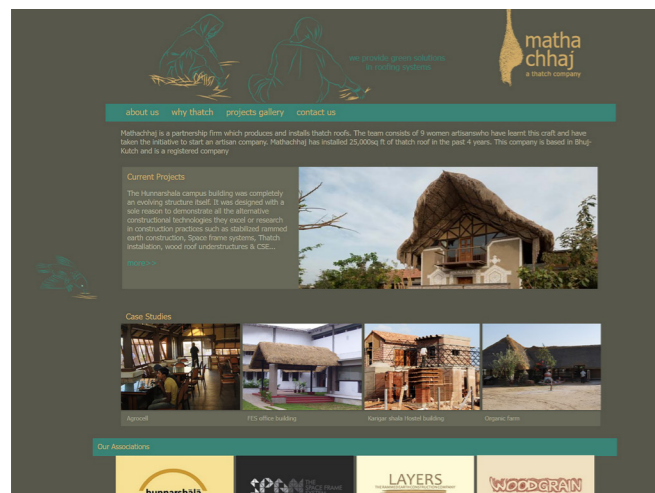
These examples signal a move away from the era of the “heroic starchitect” toward architecture as a collaborative and inclusive practice that shifts power, from the thinker towards the maker. This redefinition



The New York Five, at a time when architecture positions itself as an object of cultural prestige, a commodity rather than an act of self-building.



Mud-flooring artfully executed in a village in Madhya Pradesh. Barring the responsibility of incorporating foraged materials such as wood and twine, Women here not only execute finishes but also erect the super-structure through hand-made adobe blocks and roof tiles - in all of 27 days. Architecture holds potential in recognising these skills, and gender minorities as carriers of these skills through lived experience accumulated over generations.



Website for Matha Chhaj, a women's collective operating out of Kutch as a guild that specialises in construction of thatch roofs; Aravani Art Project, a trans-women's collective in Bangalore that specialises in creating large murals and publication graphics, lending distinctive character to public spaces in the city.



positions architecture not as a noun but as a verb—a process rooted in coalition-building and collective action.

In this view, architecture becomes an activity that has the power to coalesce and foster new identities.

Gender: A wind in your sails

The essay so far has explored how and where gender can be read in architectural space. The pertinent question that remains is: What does one do with this?

Architecture, by its very nature, is concerned with the shape and materiality of the physical interface—our constructed reality. But it is more than a neutral backdrop; it is a technology of gender (de Lauretis, 1987), a site where societal norms are embedded and reinforced. Recognizing this is not just an academic exercise but a critical means to challenge architecture's complicity in maintaining power structures. While critical frameworks—such as deconstruction, postcolonialism, feminism, queer and trans activism—have entered academia, their absorption into architecture has often been limited to stylistic exercises rather than critical practice. Architecture could radically expand by questioning the foundational principles on which the discipline rests. Instead of merely observing how architectural discourses inscribe masculine, feminine, and other gender identities, the field might explore gender as a fluid spectrum of qualities, using it to redefine the boundaries of architectural history and the discipline's future directions.

A critical lens like gender to architectural theory is what a scalpel is to a surgeon - it allows us to slice open the body of knowledge and locate how architecture has historically been

a tool for maintaining norms. It helps us question and disrupt the inherent biases coded into spatial organization, material choices, skill, and access to space. It opens the door to rethinking how we design, build and occupy our environments in ways that do not simply replicate existing hierarchies (Castello, 2023).

As demonstrated in the essay, observing gender in space is not just a battle to be fought by trans and gender non-conforming people. Binary separation is an archaic social system that traps everyone across the gender spectrum. By turning the question to the system, and looking to the lived experiences of marginalized communities, we are offered profound wisdom on how space can be adapted, reclaimed, and reimagined. Acknowledging this lived knowledge is not only an act of inclusion but a step toward collective liberation.

Trans culture, for instance, offers a valuable perspective on rethinking value and identity. The worth of an entity is not in how closely it aligns with a fixed model, like masculine or feminine ideals. Instead, value arises from its capacity to embody its unique existence, pushing at the boundaries of societal norms. This

“bordering” position, whether of a trans body or an architectural object, can reveal hidden forces that shape conventional systems, enriching the cultural landscape through expressions that exist within society's in-between spaces. This approach encourages a concept of “trans architectures”—structures that may not appear in mainstream histories but exist as transitional forms, often dismissed as incomplete or impure. If gender or architecture is not seen as a static, preordained construct but as something fluid—something with the potential for change—then this understanding holds possibilities for everyone, not just those at the margins.

Gender, along with queer and trans studies, is generating a profound cultural shift and offers an evolving set of theoretical and practical tools that architecture can harness. By adopting these tools, architectural theory can extend its field of meanings, embracing desires and identifications in relation to space. To question how we might design spaces that hold plurality, fluidity, and agency—where identity is not confined but continuously negotiated—is an act of radical imagination. And perhaps, in that, we begin to shift architecture from being a mechanism of exclusion to one of possibility.

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