
Empowerment Architecture: Examining Redemptive Spaces for Urban Women

Discussant: Sagarika Suri, MA candidate, Architecture and Urbanism, MIT

Panel Reporter: Erin Bazar, Graduate School of Library and Information
Science, Simmons College

Panel Summary: Vanessa Vega, MS, Occupational Therapy, Tufts University

Panelists:

Ian Scott Todd, PhD candidate, English, Tufts University

"Keeping Clean: Female Consumerism, Propriety, and Gendered Urban Space in the Fin de Siecle"

Erin Eckhold Sassin, PhD candidate, History of Art and Architecture, Brown University &
UMass Dartmouth

"Gendered Spaces in Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century Germany"

Faye Antonia Hays, Doctor of Design candidate, Design Studies, Harvard Graduate School of
Design

"Freedom to Dwell: Gendered Aesthetics of Informal Housing"

Ian Scott Todd's discussion of gendered spaces in the "modern city" ranged from the very open (the department store) to the seemingly private (the public restroom) in his treatise on female consumerism, propriety, and gendered urban space in the fin de siècle. At the turn of the twentieth century, a general cultural anxiety arose about the relationships between blacks and whites, middle and upper classes, and women and urban spaces. The "modern city" was the perfect stage for this discomfort to play out: it was an exciting, sensual, and stimulating place where people experienced new technologies, diversions, and commodities, but it was also a threatening place

of danger, dirt, and interactions between different classes, races, and genders. Todd asked us to consider two spaces within the modern city, both of which took form at the turn of the twentieth century with bourgeois women in mind: the department store and the public restroom. Each attempted to maintain female propriety and dictate the terms under which women move through the city by managing their contact with dirt. Todd connected the relationship between these spaces and ideas of gender to British modernist literature. In one novel, Todd suggested, public restrooms mirrored the hostility and discomfort—the critical gaze—of the outside urban space. Rather than acting as safe, clean, pleasurable spaces for women, both shop and bathroom become places where women experience hostility and judgment against one another and themselves. However, Todd also argued that women had the ability to resist such connotations, and form alternative relations to these objects and spaces throughout the city.

In “Gendered Spaces and Housing for Single People: Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century Germany,” Erin Eckhold Sassin, of Brown University and UMass Dartmouth, suggested that access to specific urban spaces and building types (housing for single workers) were intended to re-domesticate men and their residences, and provide women with spaces which were both public and private. Due to poor housing choices for workers, a campaign to build living spaces resulted in “homes away from home.” Eckhold Sassin suggested that the main intention for the men’s living spaces was to create a gendered space apart from the street which was not associated with alcohol, political activity, or loose women. The surrounding neighborhood’s acceptance of this space was emphasized by architectural markers, such as pathways running through the workers’ housing to other community buildings (such as elementary schools). The housing was intended to have a reforming role and be a positive alternative to less wholesome pursuits, such as drinking, gambling, and dancing. The main intention for women’s housing was different from that of the men, as Eckhold Sassin shows. These dwellings provided a lifestyle which was much more open than most women in their class experienced, not only because of their work outside the home, but also because of the openness of their living quarters. Eckhold Sassin emphasizes that housing, in combination with professional work, was one of the most important aspects of the relationship between women and the public sphere. These workers’ houses freed them from domestic life or unhappy marriages, and provided a transitional building leading away from the confines of the familial home.

The third panelist, Faye Antonia Hays demonstrated with the use of photographic evidence the differing aesthetic choices among households as determined by gender in seven informal Costa Rican neighborhoods. Over the course of one month of field, Hays interviewed the heads of household of twenty-one families in two different cities. From this study, Hays determined that the ability to manipulate one’s surroundings according to personal aesthetics was gender-specific. Since the 1980s, the new population growth in the region of Costa Rica in which Hays did her fieldwork has been entirely urban. While the percentage of poor households headed by women has increased in recent years, it is not necessarily accurate to describe it as a feminization of poverty. Hays described most subjects as at ease showing their homes. Many of these homes had been lived in and continually altered for twenty years or more. These homes, originally built for one or two people, mostly housed up to seven or eight people. According to Hays, evidence suggests that different genders do dwell aesthetically differently, even if this is not constant. For example, Hays asked heads of household: “If given paint, which part of your house would you paint?” She found that women were mostly concerned with painting the interior home, while only one man said he would paint the interior. Interestingly, this man is the only male head of household with no woman living with him, which indicated to Hays that he may spend more time indoors. Most men, however, would have painted the façade of their house to make it look more presentable to others. Only one respondent, a man, said he would not paint his house at all; he said he would use the paint to paint his cart to help him sell goods.