
Transformational Armatures: The Performance of Gender as/in Architecture

Discussant: Zenovia Touloudi, Doctor of Design candidate, Design Studies,
Harvard Graduate School of Design

Panel Summary: Andi Sutton, Program Manager, GCWS

Panelists:

Maryam Eskandari, MA candidate, Architecture and Islamic Architecture, MIT

"(Re)Constructing the Place of Gender in the Space of Religion: Women's Places and Spaces in the Contemporary American Mosque"

Kathleen Daly, PhD candidate, American Studies, Boston University

"Building Shapely Bodies: Architecture and Exercise for Women, 1880–1920"

Karen Robbins, PhD candidate, American Studies, Boston University

"Denison House: Social Settlement in Built Form"

In the first presentation, Maryam Eskandari looked at the way American mosques architecturally re-inscribe the culture of gender inequality practiced in Islamic countries in a way that is not commensurate with the beliefs and behaviors of many American Muslim women today. She used several examples of mosques built in the US, showing how these architectural spaces draw on a kind of cultural nostalgia, using visual and spatial designs from Muslim countries rather than creating a new architecture that fits the American cultural values of gender equality, a level of equality that she showed is written into Islamic law and the Quran. Mosques with separate entrances for women, those that require women to occupy back rooms or upper balconies, etc. have a strong psychological effect on Muslim women—especially when American mosques, more

than those in Islamic countries, serve not only as places of worship but also community centers, political hubs, educational spaces, etc. Eskandari's call for mosques that promote gender equality stems from a look at the makeup of the American Muslim community: one comprised of immigrants, converts, and American-born Muslims. Her analysis showed that converts and American-born Muslims are more likely to believe in gender equality and want this belief reflected in their places of worship. She cited writings by Muslim women about their feelings of alienation and exclusion in contemporary American mosques and discussed activist interventions into these architectural spaces that challenge the gender hierarchies of the religion. Her presentation closed with a call to action: for architects to build a new design framework based on a reading of Islam (one that pre-dates Medieval Islam) that supports gender equality, one that fits with the needs of contemporary American Muslim women. Their equal access to the architectural space reinforces equal access within the religion itself.

The second panelist, Kathleen Daly, discussed ways that late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century gymnasium architecture, and the rhetoric of women's health that surrounded the new turn towards exercise, simultaneously freed and controlled women's bodies. Central to her argument was the way the decline in birth rates of white Americans produced a racial anxiety that focused on the health of women's bodies as the key to preserving and expanding ideal, white, middle-class Americans and Americanness. Daly discussed the way gymnasiums and outdoor exercise spaces built for women during this time reinforced gender hierarchies and, though providing some blurring of the boundaries between public and private, still served to control women's bodies and, in turn, control assumptions about their capacity for independence and power. Daly highlights gymnasiums built at four women's colleges in the 1890s: Vassar, Smith, Radcliffe, and Bryn Mawr. She showed the progression each architectural space modeled towards increased gender assumptions and control of women's bodies vis a vis the layout of lockers, exercise rooms, changing rooms, and exterior ornamentation. She discussed the impact of the research and beliefs of one doctor and physical education innovator, Dudley Allen Sargent, on the building design—beliefs that reinforced assumptions that women's exercise promoted reproductive health and docility, research that promoted the “perfection” of the female body. She looked to the creation of outdoor camps for men and women as well, showing how even these—though outwardly seeming to promote independence and collectivity for women—were read at the time as protective, patronizing spaces where women's bodies continued to be controlled. And, in

each of these cases, she demonstrated how the architectural spaces as well as the rhetoric around women's exercise showed racial anxiety and misogyny, focused solely on the crafting of a white, middle-class, reproductive female ideal.

The third panelist, Karen Robbins, provided an examination of the settlement house movement, taking as an example the Denison House, a settlement house built in Boston in 1892. She positioned settlement houses, community homes, and learning centers built at the turn of the twentieth century, as spaces of cultural change in American society. These spaces were progressively minded and were run by largely female and largely white and middle-class people; they educated new immigrants and the poor in Anglo Saxon and middle-class cultural values. In her presentation, Robbins argued that settlement houses modeled progressive politics and non-traditional communal living and learning scenarios, but also re-mapped ideals of middle-class domesticity into American culture. In her analysis of the Denison House, she framed this space—architecturally and socially—as a feminine space. The building and the activities surrounding it mirrored the roles of women within the settlement movement and within the culture at large. She pointed out how the middle class women living in Denison House challenged ideas of women's roles during that era by living communally, promoting women's suffrage, and educating the poor and working classes. Their work promoted and reflected independence, education, and health, and provided a safe space for working class neighbors to congregate. But, as Robbins pointed out, while the work of Denison House and other settlement houses provided essential services to working class neighborhoods, it also acculturated the working class in a particular type of Americanness, one rooted in middle-class ideals that re-inscribed power and class privilege of the Denison House women residents.