

Gendered, non-gendered, re-gendered tools for spatial production

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Introduction

'...We constantly drift between the object & its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it but we destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but we restore it to a state which is still mystified.'¹

'...I haven't perceived a texture until I've instantaneously hypothesised whether the object I'm perceiving was sedimented, extruded, laminated, granulated, polished, distressed, felted or fluffed up.'²

The perennial question, *can design be genderless?* Is further complicated by our contingent, nuanced and transient gender identities. Our collective focus is more often upon whether spatial outcomes are gendered, rather than the gender of the processes themselves. In contrast, this paper considers to what extent our making processes are gendered and: the role of linguistics in assigning gender to the tools of production. It also asks whether tools can be un-gendered, re-gendered or non-gendered and reflects upon the need for a collective, critical awareness of the influence of gendered tools over our design processes and outcomes. It asserts the need for spatial producers - of all genders - to use un-gendered, re-gendered or non-gendered tools in order to subvert and disrupt making and maker stereotypes, and as a means to critically assess their practical utility and political influence.

Writing from the perspective of interior design and architecture educators familiar with the parallels between *object-versus-absence-of-an-object* and *exteriority-versus-interiority* disciplinary tensions, this paper explores the extent to which we are complicit agents of gender assignation: by failing to question both the tactic and explicit identity of the objects or tools used to author space. We do this by examining the role of linguistics in assigning gender to objects, calling into question the extent to which (1) gendered objects inform the wider social relations of space and (2) whether un-gendered, re-gendered or non-gendered tools of spatial production are needed, and what these might look like. Our analysis draws from two key sources: the work of selected artists addressing the gender of objects and the primary data outcomes generated within a gendered-tool making exercise at the AHRA Architecture and Feminisms Conference (at KTH, Stockholm, Nov 2016). In the second example, participants were invited to engage in making their own un-gendered, non-gendered and re-gendered tools for spatial production using what is now commonly understood as 'hacking' methodologies. A typical 'hack' involves several days intensive, multidisciplinary teamwork, where the problem is taken apart as a means to find the solution. Often competitive, sweaty and messy, hacks are used to work out solutions to any kind of product, service or space challenge, and can involve looping back on problems, or deconstructing and reconstructing existing objects or ideas to find new applications and meaning. To run the workshop as a design 'hack', was intended to disrupt the linearity of making, and to allow for reinvention as much as invention. This tactic aligns with what anthropologist Daniel Miller identified as the ability of objects to, "continually assert their presence as simultaneously material force and symbol. They frame the way we act in the world, as well as the way we think about the world".³ Subsequently, the tools produced in the workshop are qualitatively examined using the theoretical tools of constructivism within a feminist analytical framework.

Tools gendered grammar and linguistic relativity

Feminist language critique has identified that gendered language disadvantages women, and also affects the way in which everyone interprets the world around them.⁴ In many European languages, objects (nouns) without a biological sex are assigned a grammatical gender that arguably influences how we cognitively perceive and use them (linguistic relativity). The English word 'the', for instance, has three equivalents in German: *der* (masculine), *die* (feminine), *das* (neuter). These assignations enable the categorisation of inanimate and abstract nouns by gender association. For example, a simple door key is masculine in German and yet feminine in Spanish. And as one study focussed upon this distinction identifies, German speakers were inclined to describe the key as 'hard, heavy, jagged, metal, and useful', whereas Spanish speaking participants preferred to describe the same key as, 'golden, intricate, little, lovely, and tiny'. In contrast, the word 'bridge' is feminine in German and masculine in Spanish. Within the same study, German speakers described bridges as, 'beautiful, elegant, fragile, pretty, and slender', whereas Spanish speakers preferred, 'big, dangerous, strong, sturdy, and towering'.⁵ Of course, not all languages contain explicit gender assignations. Only one-fourth of the world's languages use gendered noun classifications. Indeed, languages as regionally diverse as Indonesian and Finnish have no grammatical genders whatsoever, therefore we are mindful of the inherent biases in writing from a western perspective. Across most of Europe however, languages can be divided into three gender-related groups: grammatical gender languages, natural gender languages, and genderless languages.⁶ In the English language (natural gender) there are no such grammatical gender assignations. However, the etymology of many English words have Latin (Spanish),

Germanic or French origins, so the gender assignments are more tacit, only surfacing occasionally, when certain objects are given feminine, third-person pronouns – such as ships, cars, or the most obvious ‘mother’ nature - most usually to assert authority over the object or bring it under control.⁷ Perhaps an exaggerated example of this can be found within Hawaiian linguistics, where there are two genders known as kino ‘ō (o class) and kino ‘ā (a class). Kino ‘ō nouns refer to ‘spaces’ or anything that you can enter, anything you can put on and anything you have no control over. Kino ‘ā nouns refer to everything you do have control over; your actions, extending to the people you ‘choose’ to live life with. Subsequently, the gender of the language used to describe space and space-making also becomes a question of ownership, authority and control. The question of ownership extends to human beings – which are almost always assigned to the masculine gender, whereas women are often denied belonging to the feminine gender. In German for example, *das Mädchen* (‘the girl’) and *das Fräulein* (‘unmarried woman’) are neutral (or ‘neuter’ to use the correct linguistic term), implying their lack of autonomy from men and masculinity. This becomes particularly problematic in relation to inanimate objects. For example, in French a man’s beard is feminine (*la barbe*) – implying the status of women as a form of adornment – and prompting the founding of feminist activist group of the same name,⁸ (Fig 2). Interestingly, whilst water is feminine in Russian, if you dip a teabag inside ‘her’, she becomes masculine, highlighting the significance of the ‘void’ in relation to gender.

Fig 1(a): Maria Abramović, Rhythm ‘0’ (1974)

Fig 1(b): Example of Le Barbe activism.

Gendered objects for spatial production

‘The sense in which the discipline of architecture stands back from the object, and simultaneously desires the object guarantees the anxiety associated with the admission of women into its ranks.’⁹

An example of the ownership of the means of space-making can be found in the gender assignment of the objects or tools of architectural production. For example, a drawing board (a *zeichenbrett* in German or a *tablero de dibujo* in Spanish) a pen (a *stylo* in French, a *stift* in German or an *estilógrafo* in Spanish) and paper (*papier* in French, *papel* in Spanish) are male nouns. Even the word ‘building’ (*bâtiment*, *gebäude*, *edificio*) is masculine in all three languages. In returning to Boroditsky’s linguistic study, it becomes clear that the male-gender specificity of the tools used to architect space trigger cognitive preconditions that influence how we engage with spatial production. If there is a gender-bias in the processes, then surely this is transposed into the outcomes too, which may also affect who gets to design and whom we find ourselves designing for. Jennifer Prewitt-Freilino’s research into the influence of gendered linguistics upon social and spatial hierarchies, considers the correlation between linguistic gender assignment and gender in-equality by country. If societal structures are influenced by gendered linguistics, it seems reasonable to assume that the gendered tools of spatial production are similarly affected.¹⁰ Perhaps this might account for the maleness of the architectural profession, given the low proportion of women architects who report high levels of sexism (not to mention racism and homophobia) within the industry.¹¹

Regardless of gender, the risk remains that our choice of gendered tools for spatial production may tacitly or even explicitly transpose gendered values into our spatial outcomes, not least because the relationship between the tools of design and creation, and the product/output itself is both physical and metaphysical in manifestation. What this means is that spaces that were previously considered the territory of women – for example the home – are potentially still controlled by masculine values inherent in the processes of spatial production. This calls into question the degree to which these spaces are ‘feminine’ and may begin to explain why women are seemingly still under domestic control even within the spaces they are traditionally afforded ownership of.

Fig 2(a): ‘Rosie the riveter’ (1940s) – turret lathe operator machining parts for transport planes at the Consolidated Aircraft Corporation plant, Fort Worth, Texas, USA.

Fig 2(b): ‘Woman riveted by cooking’. (1940s)

Having previously been denied access to the workplace, early 20th Century women were expected to focus upon becoming skilful and creative ‘home-makers’ by displaying culinary to craft expertise often requiring a range of complex tools. When the Second World War labour shortages required women to enter the workplace, they were unsurprisingly agile in adapting to skilled industrial tasks previously considered beyond them: home-making had perhaps provided them with forms of expertise applicable in industry. Indeed, innovations in post-war domestic appliances were no doubt driven by a need to persuade women to give up their jobs and return to the home, to enable the returning soldiers to claim their former jobs back. It evidently wasn’t enough to simply make them pink.¹² Subsequently, the extent to which women have influenced tools for spatial production – and in general, tools we would otherwise associate with the professional activities of men - might be far greater than we previously assumed.

The Stockholm workshop: prose positioning piece

In her book, *The Third Body* (2010) Hélène Cixous uses fantasy, anecdote and lyricism amongst other things, to evoke the narrators' relationship with her lover as one that alternates between presences, absences, separations and reconnections. Drawing inspiration from this approach, one of the authors of this paper composed a segment of prose highlighting the relationship between tools and creation, and as such, women and their constructed environments. The prose below was read aloud to the workshop participants during the tool making/re-making workshop in Stockholm as a means to cognitively assert the philosophical enquiry underpinning the exercise.

To make, to create, to build,... to CRAFT.
Craft with utensils, with tools, with kits... with TRAPPINGS.
Trappings of might, of valour, of courage... of HEROISM.
Heroism of courage, of freedom, of neutrality... of OBJECTIVITY.

Objectivity of space, of place, of house,... of HOME.
A home, a room, a status,... a SYMBOL.
A symbol of struggle, of bias, of favouritism,... of PREFERENCE.
A preference of ease, of comfort, of tradition,... of CONSTRUCT.

A construct, a theory, a paradigm,... a LIFE.
A life of objects, of belongings, of entities,... of LABELS.
Labels of gender, of age, of ability,... of SEXUALITY.
Sexuality of feeling, of memory, of emotion... of SENTIMENT.

Sentiment of love, of hate... of INDIFFERENCE.
Indifference of association, of class, of kind... of RELATIONS.
Relations of meaning, of insight, of intent... of AMBITION.
Ambition of change, of trade, of modification... of REVOLUTION. (Barton, G., 2016)

The role of fantasy that Abramović and Cixous embody is key to liberating oneself from the dictates of binary gender identity, evoking the freedom to infer, to speculate... to create and the ability to imagine a new world, re-imagine the existing one. As 'Cixous once said, "I give myself a poet's right, otherwise I would not dare to speak."¹³ Similarly, by using prose to distinguish the academic presentation of the enquiry from the creative request, the intention was to offer participants a poetic entitlement to make and re-make a new relationship with the tools of spatial production. By configuring new objects from old, the tools of spatial production are divorced from their linguistic ties, hacked from their social connotations, and primed for new forms of spatial imaginings.

The Stockholm workshop: from objects to tools

'What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms.'¹⁴

In 1974, Maria Abramović stood motionless in an art gallery next to a table containing objects associated with pain or pleasure: a whip, honey, grapes, a feather, knives, lipstick, a camera, a scalpel, a rose and a gun and a single bullet, and endured multiple assaults from gallery attendees. Invariably, these tools were used to cut, harm and humiliate Abramovic by the audience, and even involved a mortal threat, requiring intervention (Fig 1(a)). Much like Abramović's tableau, our AHRA workshop in Stockholm offered a tableau of objects that the audience was invited to re-gender/non-gender/un-gender (Fig 3(a) and 3(b)): tools that could – unlike Abramović's installation - cause harm as well as good. Whereas some of the items were traditional tools for spatial production: such as rulers, pens, compasses, others could be considered explicitly female artefacts such as tampons and lipstick, and crucially (and even ironically) not associated with creativity or acts of production. We also provided children's toys and everyday domestic unisex items such as toothbrushes for the participants to engage with, and like Abramovic's tableau, we included items associated with erotic pleasure such as feathers, ties and tape. Due to time constraints, the focus of the workshop was limited to the creation of the tools, rather than their creative (or corporeal) application. However, the workshop highlighted the way in which Abramović's Rhythm '0' embodied 'hack' methodologies long before both the term and process were claimed by today's designers. Object utility and identity was subverted through the mediating effect of a female body, in much the same way that architecture's utility and identity is either established or challenged by the often overlooked needs of female end users. Whether an intentionally female-gendered tool used as tools to design architecture might change architecture clearly requires further testing and application. However, even speculating upon how a feathery and bristly hand tool might shift spatial construction inspires thoughts of blurred material boundaries, and toddler-safe, soft edges that caress and stroke upon

contact. Consequently, we recognise that our study makes limited utility of Abramović's legacy, but her methodologies – as potential architectural processes – are, in our view, wholly useful.

If, “the design processes of architecture and interior design share the same procedural sequence and core discipline vocabulary”¹⁵ then could non-procedural or specifically non-gendered, un-gendered or re-gendered tools result in liberated forms of design vocabulary? By asking this question of participants attending the AHRA Architecture and Feminisms Conference, in Stockholm,¹⁶ we were able to observe not only the tools participants created, but also the language used to define them.

Fig 3(a): Tableau of Objects from ‘Non-gendered/un-gendered/re-gendered tools for spatial production’ artefacts workshop, AHRA conference, Stockholm

Fig 3(b): AHRA Conference delegates engaging with Tableau of Objects

Gender-hacking artefacts

If objects, “arouse curiosity, resist implausible manipulation, and collect layers of information about them,”¹⁷ applying any one interpretation to the objects generated during the workshops would prove both problematic and pointless. What the forms and the names assigned to the objects did reveal however, was an inclination towards using them as a means to (1) subvert stereotypes and, (2) to critique (Fig.4(a-c)).

Fig 4(a): ‘listen-up’ (tampon headphones)

Fig 4(b): ‘angelic blood-red, toothbrush totem’

Fig 4(c): ‘different scales of time: non-human, fleeting is time gendered?’

Whilst feminist constructivist analysis emphasises the way in which meaning is socially constructed, it also reminds us that knowledge is situated within specific discourses, contexts, regions and other forms of constructed identity beyond gender. For this reason, we make no attempt to suggest that these artefacts provide a solution to the problem of gendered tools for spatial production – and perhaps more poignantly, who gets to author both the tools themselves and the spaces they are used to configure. Instead, we argue that if gender is a socially constructed category then it can and should be made and remade – and that this making and remaking needs to involve all gender categories and involve processes and not just outcomes.

Conclusions

‘Instead of speaking of ‘women’ we should speak of the unstable and shifting equations produced by the conjunction of architecture + female + male + architecture, or word + object + architecture; and we would have to specify which part of architecture we meant...this would be the project that would discover what the ambiguity of outside/inside and invention might mean for women in architecture.’¹⁸

Through the process of highlighting the latent linguistic attributes of tools for spatial production, our intention was not to infer that gender is wholly shaped by language. Instead, we take the view - as feminist constructivists - that gender is socially constructed and therefore open to negotiation. However, within a society increasingly fraught with hierarchy and inequality, negotiations aren't taking place between equal partners¹⁹ because the tools of production are not universally created or owned. This is where invented or reimagined tools can play an important role in destabilising and disrupting the influence of gender hierarchies over designed processes and outcomes, and indeed all hierarchies within the professional field of spatial production. Whereas constructivism identifies that objects act as a form of ‘glue’ that facilitates social interaction,²⁰ gendered tools become the objects to which gender is delegated²¹ abstracted and therefore easier to name or rename – whether we use gendered or un-gendered terms to do so. In our view, it is only through doing this that we can become conscious of the latent or explicit biases within our own processes, and work with (1) a critical awareness of the influence of gendered tools over our design processes and outcomes and a desire to mitigate against them (2) the conviction that we are both entitled and able to subvert and disrupt stereotypes, and to critically assess them. For this reason we conclude that the tools of spatial production and not just the spaces themselves are a part of architecture's historical, theoretical and sociological canon. They are as much a part of the making of architecture as buildings and spaces themselves and their subjective power and influence should be better captured, articulated, shared and understood.

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