

Desiring Practices
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Subjective Space: A Feminist Architectural History of the Burlington Arcade

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Feminist concerns are being addressed and developed with much success in fields such as history, art history, cultural studies, geography and philosophy. This paper raises the implications of feminism for the practice of architectural history. In so doing, it questions the basic tenets of architectural history, and proposes a new gendered practice; firstly, by suggesting new objects of study – the actual material which historians choose to look at; and second, by rethinking, from a feminist perspective, the intellectual criteria by which historians interpret those objects of study. In short then, this paper is concerned with defining the methodological approaches of a new gendered practice – that of a feminist architectural history. Such a project is necessarily both theoretical and historical. Theoretically, it is motivated by feminist concerns and draws its methods from various other disciplines, particularly history, art history, cultural geography and philosophy. Historically, these concerns are explored through the study of architectural space, in this paper, the places of upper class leisure and consumption in London's West End of the early nineteenth century, specifically, the Burlington Arcade built off Piccadilly between 1818 -9.

Architectural History and Feminist Architectural History

Before detailing the actual historical and theoretical content of this paper, it is worth noting the academic context in which it is located, and which it radically critiques. Architectural history can be broadly described as a practice which studies the history of buildings. Although approaches vary, traditionally architectural historians have tended to concentrate on those buildings financed by wealthy and influential patrons, and to analyse them from particular perspectives, in terms of their form and aesthetics. In architectural history, feminists have sought so far to establish a history of women architects by uncovering evidence of women's architectural contributions. Although useful in providing new material, this work rarely questions conventional architectural historical models or raises methodological issues concerning, for example, the status of the architectural object, the role of the architect and kind of analysis relevant to the objects of study.

But, it is important to note at this stage, that feminism is composed of numerous diverse and often contradictory approaches. This paper proposes a particular practice of feminist architectural history which, using critical techniques developed through feminist work, extends the work of marxists in the field of architectural history. Marxist architectural history entails seeing buildings as the products of the processes of capitalism and as such to represent the political, social and cultural values of dominant classes and elite social groupings. But although marxist architectural historians have considered the social production of architecture and its reproduction through image and text, seldom has this work been from a feminist perspective. The intention here is to position a practice of

architectural history which is critical of both patriarchy and capitalism, and also seeks to recognise the ways in which systems of gender and class oppression intersect with systems of racial, ethnic and sexual domination.

Locating the Object of Study

This paper takes as its theoretical point of departure the paradigm of the “separate spheres” – the ideology which divides city from home, public from private, production from reproduction, and men from women. The origins of this separate spheres ideology are both patriarchal, resulting from the rule of the “father” in contemporary western societies, and capitalist, following the dominance of capitalism in these societies. It is both an oppositional and an hierarchical system, consisting of a dominant public male realm of production (the city) and a subordinate private female one of reproduction (the home). The separate spheres is the most pervasive spatial configuration of sexual and social relations, yet, as an ideological device, it does not always describe the full range of lived experience of all urban dwellers.

Unfortunately, architectural history, even that written from a feminist stance, has so far tended to accept this prevailing ideological system. However it is possible, following on from the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, to “deconstruct” the male/female polarity of the separate spheres, exposing it as a binary system which allows things to be only “like” or “not like” the dominant category, and instead to replace prevailing intellectual norms with new formulations. To do this there needs to be a three fold intervention.

Firstly, the binary pair must be reversed so that the term occupying the negative position is placed in the positive position. Up to now this has been the stance of feminist architectural historians who have concentrated on looking at women’s relation to the private realm through domestic architecture, or who have sought to describe a uniquely female architectural heritage. Such a strategy runs the risk, however, of simply reproducing the binary pairing, albeit with the female sphere in the dominant position.

Second, there must be a movement of displacement, in which the negative term is displaced from its dependent position. This is a possibility implicitly dealt with by art historians who have re-evaluated the negative status of the female private sphere by looking at the suburb as the site of production – specifically, at the Parisian suburb of Passy as the artistic production of Impressionist artist Berthe Morisot. Alternatively, cultural historians and theorists have debated the engagement of women in the public realm of the city. More recently, models of public masculinity are starting to be re- defined in connection with constructions of domesticity.

Still missing from these two tactics is, however, the third and most important intervention, that of the identification of a term which is undecidable within a binary logic – a term that includes both binary terms and yet exceeds their scope. It is this critical move which this paper demonstrates, showing that there are architectural spaces within the city which are neither wholly private nor public, male nor female, urban nor domestic. Simultaneously, though not denying the historical importance of the ideology of the separate spheres, it

shows that architectural history cannot be adequately and entirely described within its parameters.

But how do such concerns determine the choice of an object of study for a feminist architectural history? Here the decision to focus on the Burlington Arcade demonstrates a number of criteria. Firstly, the historical period in which the arcade was built – the Regency years between 1811 and 1821 – is one of theoretical importance. It precedes the emergence of the ideology of the separate spheres as the dominant capitalist and patriarchal configuration of gender and space, and so is critical to an examination of the construction of this ideology. Second, the new kinds of spaces which emerge during this period, particularly in London, due to the rise of commodity capitalism, are places of consumption, exchange and display, where women are highly visible as consumers. The important notion here is that consumption, as a socio-economic activity, is uncontainable within the separate spheres ideology by virtue of the fact that it is neither production nor reproduction. For the cultural critic Walter Benjamin (1892 - 1940), the arcades were “the primeval landscape of consumption”. Third, in terms of their spatial configuration, the arcades provide an archetypal example of the interpenetration of public and private space, they are both privately owned and publicly used, both building interior and city street. For the cultural critic, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), they were “bourgeois interiors forced outwards”.

A Theoretical Framework for Analysis.

So far theory has operated in this paper as an organising mechanism for choosing objects of historical study. The Burlington Arcade has been located as an object of study for a feminist architectural history since it is a space that demonstrates the problematic nature of binary knowledge – it is both a public and a private space and a place of neither production nor reproduction, but consumption. But it is also necessary to develop theoretical models for organising historical enquiry and architectural analysis. Traditional modes of architectural history have talked about the arcade in terms of aesthetics, form, physical modification and spatial typology, but a practice of feminist marxist architectural history has a different agenda. Marxist architectural historians, traditionally interested in looking at the production of architecture, are now beginning to express an interest in exploring historically the nature of spatial experience and the ways in which architecture has been appropriated and used as a setting for everyday life. Contemporary feminists in cultural geography are looking increasingly at issues of consumption, feminist historians and art historians are examining the relation between representation and experience, whilst current debates in feminist theory are focusing on the female difference, subjectivity and identity. From these concerns can be identified three areas that a feminist marxist architectural history might focus on: architectural production, representation and experience. This paper shall now briefly look at each of these in turn.

Production

The work of the marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre provides a useful theoretical framework to consider the production of architectural space. Rather than considering the production of the urban realm simply through the activity of the building industry and urban design professions – as do many historians – Lefebvre’s concern is with the conceptual as well as material production of space. Production of space, for Lefebvre, is in effect social

reproduction, a social process involving a coming into consciousness, and thus a process not dissimilar to feminist concerns with both social and biological reproduction. Lefebvre suggests that the social production of space works through three different yet interactive levels: “spatial practice”, material or functional space, “representations of space”, space as codified language, and “representational space”, the lived everyday experience of space. For an architectural historian it follows the (re)production of architectural space is a social process, i.e. that architecture must therefore be considered as both structured by and structuring of social relations. For feminists the emphasis shifts to examine the importance of space in the production of gender relations, and conversely, the significance of gender in spatial constructions. This paper investigates each of the gendered aspects spatial practice, representation and experience in turn in the Burlington Arcade. Looking first at commodity consumption as the dominant spatial practice in the arcade, and then showing how the arcade also necessarily involved representation and experience as part of its contribution to the reproduction of Regency London.

The first London arcades were constructed during the early decades of the nineteenth century in the fashionable and wealthy residential areas of the West End around Piccadilly. The emergence of commodity capitalism in London at this time required new outputs for the sale of commodities – the Burlington Arcade was part of a scheme to promote the area west of Regent Street as an upper class shopping zone. In order to exploit the luxury market, it was important to create a privately-owned realm within the public zone, a place socially protected from the street for an élite class of shopper. Arcades such as the Burlington were intended both as places of static consumption and as covered routes for an “agreeable promenade” – and as such provided a new kind of urban space. The luxury commodity industry required products to be displayed not as use-values with a necessary productive process lying behind them, but as pure commodities – items for exchange. This focus on display and exchange, geographically divorced from the place of production, allowed shops to be smaller (and also allowed narrow strips of unusable urban land to be economically developed). The spatial layout of the arcades exploited this possibility – the shallow depths of the shop units and their wide frontages enhanced viewing possibilities. The shop fronts in particular became the most important feature of the design by utilising the dual properties of glass. As a transparent material, glass allowed an interior view and an opportunity for both presenting and protecting the commodities. As a reflecting material, glass acted as a mirror for “conspicuous” consumers to view themselves. Glass was also a very expensive material which added to the perception of the arcades as luxury zones.

But the new building typology in itself was not enough to ensure the commercial success of the arcade. In order to sell the luxury goods, a new labour force and a larger consumer population were also necessary. It was intended that women fill such roles. Like the other new shopping venues, the exchanges and bazaars, the staff was almost entirely female. One of the contemporary reasons for building the Burlington Arcade was “to give employment to industrious females”. Although we do not know exactly how many women worked in the Burlington Arcade, we do know that six of the original 47 shop owners were women. We can also presume from the kind of “genteel businesses” located in the arcade, such as milliners, hosiers, hairdressers, jewellers and florists, that the customers were intended to be female as well as male.

Here we have looked at commodity consumption as the dominant form of spatial activity in the arcade, and at women's increasingly important role as consumers of commodities. However, the French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray has pointed out that women are, in a patriarchal society, often "owned" by men and treated as commodities; as mothers, wives, daughters, as virgins and as prostitutes. In doing so, Irigaray has reworked the marxist theory of commodity fetishism so that women are the commodities in patriarchal exchange. The fact that during the early nineteenth century the word commodity was used to describe a woman's genital organs – a modest woman was a private commodity and a prostitute was a public commodity – serves to highlight women's role as commodities. In this light, consumption and commodification begin to look rather different, and an examination of the area around the Burlington Arcade in the early decades of the nineteenth century gives us the chance to focus on some of the gendered aspects of bourgeois consumption and to think of how the role of woman-as-commodity might be conceived of spatially.

If we take a closer look at the district immediately surrounding the arcade at the beginning of the nineteenth century we find that it was an area of male upper class leisure, housing a large number of male venues, such as the coffee houses, gaming rooms and clubs of St. James's Street and Pall Mall. Bond Street was the site of male fashion or dandyism, something nowadays used to refer to over-dressed effeminacy, but which reflected an intense pre-occupation with masculinity and self-presentation as suited the bachelor. The streets in the vicinity of the Burlington Arcade also provided lodgings in the form of chambers and hotels for the single men of the nobility, gentry and professional classes.

As part of the services provided for its male population, the area around the arcade was known for its high class brothels and courtesans' residences, and the streets of St. James's, Pall Mall, Piccadilly and the Haymarket formed a circuit notorious for street walkers. The Burlington Arcade played an important part in the commerce of prostitution. Located in an upper class male district, the arcade provided a wealthy clientele and in terms of its spatial layout it offered a covered place in which to promenade. The design of the shops, as discrete and self contained units, each with individual and private staircases to upper chambers, allowed them to be used for prostitution by the shopgirls themselves or hired out by prostitutes. Architecturally the spaces of the arcade, having been constructed around relations of looking, in order to display commodities, provided places for men to gaze at the "professional beauties". This may have referred to the female shoppers and shop girls, as well as the prostitutes, and to pornographic images concealed inside snuff boxes and watches which were displayed in the windows of tobacconists and jewellers.

Representation

So far then, we have considered the ways in which the Burlington Arcade was produced as an architectural space through different types of consumption. It was designed as a space for female consumers, or shoppers, but used by men as a place in which to consume female commodities as images, as bodies on display, and as prostitutes. Obviously the role of consumer and commodity provide quite different historical experiences for women. If we are to take issues such as subjectivity and identity seriously we need to look at the ways in which our knowledge of female experience is obscured historically through the construction of gendered systems of representation. Through the work of feminist art historians, we learn how images of women in paintings rarely represent women's own lives, but stand for qualities of purity and innocence, or evil and destructive forces. Similarly, in sculpture, stone figures of women are used as allegories, of say, liberty and freedom. Such media use both the female body and ideas of the "feminine" to stand for abstract concepts and values. In terms of space, however, there is still much to explore. Feminist geographers, although useful in pointing to considerations of gender in the production of space, have not yet begun to analyse social spaces as systems of representation; it is here that a feminist architectural history can make a contribution in defining a new gendered practice.

Representations of the Burlington Arcade were structured around images of the female body and ideas of the feminine in order to simultaneously signify both innocence and seduction. On the one hand, the Burlington Arcade located the female body of the shop girl as the site of desire in order to attract male custom. In literature and art spaces of commodity consumption with their primarily female work force and female customers were represented as places of sexual intrigue. For example, in a print of the New Exchange (1772) the female occupants are pointed out as the focus of male attention and in George Cruikshank's, *The Bazaar* (1816) and "Humphrey Hedgehog" 's poem *the London Bazaar: or, Where to Get Cheap Things*, (1816) women are clearly one of the "things" to be "got" cheap. Magazines aimed at the sexual pursuits of the Regency man about town, such as the *Ranger* and *Rambler*, located the Burlington Arcade as a place to pick up women and as the setting for tales of sexual seduction. In novels representing the adventures of sporting men or rambler about town pleasure resorts, such as the arcades, were located as the site of sexual pleasure and female prostitution. Architectural references also played a part in the gendering of the spaces of the arcade, the use of scaled down miniaturised elevations, combined with the lack of servicing elements usually found on the exterior face of buildings, created an almost theatrical effect. This atmosphere of unreality was emphasised by the unusual quality of the light. It was quite rare at this time for an outside space to be covered and lit through roof lights and the feeling of otherworldliness may have increased the connection of the arcades with a state of mind removed from the everydayness of the city – a world of fantasy, desire and seduction, notions connected with patriarchal constructions of the unknowable as the feminine.

On the other hand, the presence of a female figure also provided an image of purity and virtue in the perilous city, signifying security in order to attract female shoppers. In contemporary novels, shopping venues were represented as respectable female zones. Ideas of safety were also conjured up architecturally through references to the home environment and aspects of domesticity. The intimate scale of the arcade and interior

details, such as bow windows, low doorways and fireplaces represented bourgeois ideologies of family and stability and so attracted “virtuous” dress makers and milliners and kept them off the perilous streets. Each shop unit was in essence a miniature home, with individual staircases, living and sleeping chambers.

These various uses of the female figure and the feminine all detract from women’s identity. But by far the most pervasive gendered representation is the prostitute, a figure with whom all women who occupied the arcade were conflated. The female shopper was required to express the status of her husband through her “conspicuous consumption”— the items she bought, the clothes she wore and the amount of leisure time she spent shopping – but any concern with appearance was characterised as trivial and superfluous, and so female shoppers were susceptible to being labelled a “dolly mop” or part-time prostitute. Similarly, shopgirls were denigrated as “sly-girls” who supplemented their income with part-time prostitution. Although prostitution did provide extra income for women whose wages were otherwise inadequate, the term was used to describe young single working women regardless of whether they were being paid for sexual favours. Contemporary male commentators linked all the common female occupations – actresses, ballet dancers, laundresses, milliners, seamstresses and servants – to prostitution.

In order to unravel this association of women with prostitution in the arcade it is necessary to think simultaneously of the social mechanisms of patriarchy and capitalism. The development of commodity capitalism at this time required women to enter the public spaces of the city both as producers and consumers, but to do so involved moving beyond the immediate control of the male in the patriarchal family unit. The increasing movement of women into spaces outside the family home resulted in the extension of patriarchal control into public spaces of the city, codified through government legislation, such as the Vagrancy Acts of 1822. These laws exerted control over female urban movement in public urban spaces through the figure of the prostitute. Representing public women as prostitutes and connecting prostitution with sexual deviant or criminality, provided a clear moral warning to those women who attempted to populate the public zones of the city, that such acts were ones of social and spatial “transgression”.

In later Victorian London, the prostitute, through her notorious ability to carry and spread disease – syphilis through her body and immorality through her mind, came to symbolise the chaos and disorder of the health, transport and sanitary problems of the city as a whole. As a result prostitutes were spatially confined in nineteenth century Lock Hospitals through another piece of legalisation, the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s. Arcades themselves were also employed to regulate the feminine and mercurial city. In 1855, a number of schemes put forward to counter city congestion employed the use of huge arcades around London.. The Great Victorian Way, proposed by Joseph Paxton (1801-65), would have been a 10 mile arcade linking all of London’s major railway stations, with covered transport, apartments, shops, offices and other entertainment facilities. Given that arcades were associated with prostitution, the Great Victorian Way looks like a proposal for an enormous brothel. In this light, its popular name – the Great Girdle – is of particular interest for connecting the female body to the city; the Great Girdle was to control London in the same way a girdle restrains the wayward female body.

Experience

As we have seen, gendered forms of representation mask our historical knowledge of the women who occupied the arcade and the city around it. To hear of the experience of women in the Burlington Arcade, we would need to find the personal memoirs of the shoppers, shopgirls and prostitutes. But although some feminists have used women's real and imaginary writings about their urban experiences as evidence of their life in the city, feminist historians are currently critiquing the possibility of locating female subjectivity historically through the recovery of evidence about experience. Emphasis is being placed instead on interpreting the categories of historical enquiry. Gendered terms of identity, such as "woman", "female" or "feminine", are shown to be social constructions which vary historically in relation to structures of masculinity and according to differences among women. In this way, feminism offers possibilities of looking at differences of class, sexuality, race and culture which reinforce or oppose gender oppression, thus complicating history still further.

In the Burlington Arcade we see, for example, clear differences of class in the women who occupied it, the professional mistresses and street-walkers, the shoppers and shopgirls. The wealthy prostitute or courtesan could bribe the arcade beadles, entering the arcade both to spend money and to meet her clients. Conversely, the working class prostitute was kept outside the arcade gates, picking up her clients from the street. The female shopper spent money on fashion and personal commodities, yet when the working class shop girl did so, she was accused of "dressing up", or rising above herself. She was criticised for her vanity and deviant sexuality, just as male commentators identified the love of finery as a main cause of prostitution. Here, dress, by offering women the possibility of rendering class identity invisible, posed a threat to social order. As a result, men blamed female sexuality and classified the working class "imitator" as a prostitute or sexual deviant, while other women were protected by class from such mis-representations.

Differences of race are also apparent in the arcades. The arcaded Quadrant Colonnade (1817-23) section of Regent Street was modelled by its architect John Nash (1752-1835) on the Parisian arrangement of mixing shops and flats. This mixture of foreign buildings and people – Regent Street was at this time renowned for promenading Frenchmen – worked initially as an attraction in terms of the exotic and the different. However, being French at a time when France and England were political rivals was also something to be distrusted, French connections were perceived as signs of immorality, prostitutes in the Burlington Arcade were considered to be French, while, conversely, the French women living near the Quadrant were thought to be prostitutes. Similarly, the foreign influence of Italian Opera and French ballet in neighbouring theatres was deemed responsible for a lack of morality in the colonnade; as a result, the colonnade was demolished in 1848.

One other thing to be noted in this history are the assumptions made of female and male sexuality. Specifically, male desire, for the prostitute, shopper and shopgirl, is perceived only in terms of male heterosexuality, while the sexuality of the prostitute, shopper and shopgirl is equally unquestioned. We should also question the assumed link between being female and having feminine qualities – and between male and having masculine qualities – as a

fixed and unchanging one. For example, the figure of the dandy exceeds the representational possibilities of the male-masculine, female -feminine polarity. The male dandy was a shopper, he was interested in being watched and being on display, but here the displayed and feminine object, unlike the female shopper and shopgirl, is also a desiring male subject. The way in which the figure of the dandy slips through the conventional gendered classification helps to explain the association of dandies with sexual deviancy, both as effeminate and as homosexual – a myth which appears to have no historical grounding.

Explorations of the relations between gender, class, race and sexuality provide an important focus to current feminist theoretical discourse about female subjectivity and experience. Metaphoric spatial terms, such as “standpoint”, “position” and “margin”, are being used to allow for differences in female identity. Feminist architectural history is able to inform this discourse by providing historical evidence of real spatial practices. This can be shown through a comparison of the varying spatial practices of different females; the courtesan and the prostitute, the female shopper and shopgirl, in the Burlington Arcade.

The private ownership of the Burlington Arcade meant that there were regulations concerning spatial behaviour. The arcade was locked at night, and when open during the day, movement through it was required to be quiet and slow. Such regulations were enforced by the entrance guards or beadles. Entry was also at the discretion of the beadles, which meant that the working class could be excluded from this luxury upper class shopping zone. There was, however, one kind of working class woman who could enter the arcade: the courtesan, mistress to members of the nobility. Her acquired class status allowed her to defy social controls over spatial movement and so gave her an urban experience denied to the working class prostitute, who could only enter the arcade by bribing the beadles or picking up clients from the streets outside. Historical representations of the shop girl as prostitute are also related to the spaces of the city that they occupied. The social disorder threatened by mistaking a well -dressed working class shop assistant for an upper class woman was morally controlled by representing the working class woman as a prostitute. But it was through her close physical contact with upper class shoppers that the female shop assistant both acquired the ability to imitate the dress and manners of upper class women and encouraged speculation about their sexual reputations due to their close proximity to upper class men. The differing spatial location of women in the city, gives rise to differing kinds of mis-representation and so highlights the importance of space in the construction of female identities.

Conclusion: The Practice of Feminist Architectural History

This paper has outlined the methodology of a feminist marxist architectural history and demonstrated through the Burlington Arcade how this new gendered practice can be used to examine architecture historically. It is beyond the scope of this paper, but important to note, that such a mode of enquiry can be used to investigate gender, class, sexual and racial divisions in contemporary architectural spaces. Further it is also worth mentioning that Bringing feminist and marxist concerns to bear on architectural history in this way also allows a different kind of engagement with a number of other practices. Thinking about the critical role that architecture plays in the construction of identity may provide new models

for about looking at the notion of experience in feminist history and theory. Considering the differing experiences of architectural occupation through representational codes may suggest other ways of conceiving and designing architectural space. In short, this new practice of feminist marxist architectural history can suggest ways in which historical, architectural and feminist practices can inform and transform one another, by looking more closely at the intersection of gender and the use, representation and experience of architectural space.

Illustrations

“Both Public and Private”

Thomas H Shepherd, Burlington Arcade, Piccadilly, London, Jones and Co., 1828.

“Viewing Commodities”

Iain Borden, The Burlington Arcade, London, 1992.

“Women on Display”

The New Exchange, London, 1772.

“Female Consumers”

Evelina, Mrs. Mirvan and Maria Shopping, in Fanny Burney, *Evelina or Female Life in London*, London, Jones and Co., 1822

“Mimicking Domesticity”

Interior of Burlington Arcade in John Tallis, *London Street Views*, London: John Tallis, 1838, part 71.

“Shops as Minature Homes”

John Tallis, *London Street Views*, London: John Tallis, 1838, part 71.

“The Dandy, Feminine Masculinity”

George Cruikshank, *The Dandies Coat of Arms*, London, T. Tegg, 1819.

Endnotes

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The two arcades constructed at this time were the Royal Opera Arcade (1815-7), Pall Mall, designed by John Nash and George Repton, see the *Survey of London*, vol. 29-30, (London: The Athlone Press, 1960), pp. 240-9; and Johann Friedrich Geist, *Arcades: the History of a Building Type*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983, pp. 313-4, and the Burlington Arcade, (1818-9), Piccadilly, designed by Samuel Ware, see the *Survey of London*, vol. 31-2, pp. 430-4; and Johann Friedrich Geist, *Arcades: the History of a Building Type*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983, pp. 318-27.

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