

The concept of gender specificity in architecture and how gender can be differentiated

Gender is a topic that has been debated for years and most currently now in the 21st century, the idea of feminism and femaleness have been considered historically to encompass a set of qualities and characteristics that are distinct from maleness and masculinity. What exactly defines whether an architectural structure has a gender specific bias? Is it possible to have a gender inclusive space or does it always have to be gender specific?

Research in this field started to appear from 1970's to the 1990's by feminist architects and designers. In *Tendencies and Trajectories: Feminist approaches in Architecture* written by Jane Rendell from the SAGE handbook of *Architectural Theory*¹, Jane talk about the several approaches to looking at how architecture can be impacted by gender. One of the ways in which she discusses is to “critique architectural value systems” such as “man-made” environments. Jane Rendell quotes Delores Hayden who is also mentioned in the SAGE book talks about how certain features of “man-made environments discriminate agains women such as inhospitable streets, sexist symbols in outlets and pornographic outlets.”² Feminist architects aim to create improve spaces that allow for women safety, childcare, spatial needs and desires of a woman. This shows a background to the beginning of how the topic or gender came into the world of architecture. Female designers aimed to start creating gender specific places for women rather than for only men which suited their “spatial needs and desires”

¹ SAGE handbook of *Architectural Theory*, by Crysler, Greig, Cairns, Stephen, Heynen, Hilde

² SAGE handbook of *Architectural Theory*, by Crysler, Greig, Cairns, Stephen, Heynen, Hilde

The term “Phallic” is used to describes any buildings that is erected from the ground. In ancient times, the symbol of an erect phallus as an architectural structure was used as superstitious purpose or to resemble fertility motifs in parts of the buildings or temples in Far east Asia and Mali.³ In the 21st century, scholars of anthropology, sociology and feminism have started to analyze the symbolism of phallic architecture and relate them to sky scrapers to show male dominance, but at the same time, recently female designers are being focused on for creating buildings that have female gentilia connotations to them. This leads me to Zaha Hadid’s stadium structure in Tokyo. Many female designs have taken inspiration throughout the years from the female body, such as the fluidity of curved lines creating curvaceous forms which links to the enclosure of a space. Zaha Hadid’s stadium is being assumed to look like a vagina because of the shape and curvaceous aesthetics to it. A stadium in an enclosed space which is usually made round to give a focal point to the center where the main program is most important. After reading more on this, Zaha Haddid insists that the roof that apparently looks like swollen flaps were inspired by sails of a local dhow sailing boat. The stadium has been ridiculed as it is a sports building facility and should not have a femaleness to it.

Another building I have chosen to discuss is 41 Cooper Square designed by Thom Mayne. This building is a metallic box that has an opening that exposes its skeletal structure that creates a juxtaposed effect against the old brownstone buildings that surround it. The way this building was built was with thought and process considering certain aspects of its surroundings. Although because of the modernity of this building in comparison to its surroundings, the architect embodies cultural details and characteristics to it. For example, there is a large Ukrainian

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phallic_architecture

community in that part of the city, Thom Mayne, built a window that mirrors the Ukrainian Church across from it to show adaptation to its cultural surroundings. Architecture today is about creating inventive forms through new technologies and innovation whilst still adapting to certain societies and cultures. Architecture has stopped being just about individuals or specific genders and rather about groups of people in these societies and cultures. Architecture was once a male dominant field where as now it is mixed, because of this, building may have inspiration of the male and female body because of history, but that does not clarify it as being gender specific because of it. Today, gender inclusive spaces are much more common, than they were in the past. The idea of gender-exclusivity still is used in certain areas such as bathrooms, but even now, more than ever it is being changed so that non-gendered bathroom exists. Gendered spaces are not based of the structure of its building, by its shape, colour, or by stereotypical spaces that are created inside desired for either a man or a woman, through gender equality, more and more spaces are gender neutral.