

# Women & The Architectural Review: the Gendered Presentation of Architectural Work

**Mujeres y la revisión arquitectónica: la presentación de género en el trabajo arquitectónico**

**Mulheres e a revisão arquitetônica: a apresentação de gênero de trabalho arquitetônico**

Recibido: 10 de febrero de 2016. Aprobado: 27 de marzo de 2017. Modificado: 8 de abril de 2017

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18389/dearq20.2017.04>

Artículo de opinión

## Abstract

As an essential component of architectural education –the architectural review– requires students of architecture to perform regularly before their professors and peers. Feminist performance theory and the history of the representation of the female body can shed light on the lingering inequalities between men and women in architecture school.

*Key words:* Women, architecture, architectural review, performance, feminism, performance theory, female body

## Resumen

Un componente fundamental de la formación arquitectónica –la revisión arquitectónica– exige que los estudiantes de arquitectura con frecuencia expongan frente a sus profesores y pares. La teoría de la interpretación feminista y la historia de la representación del cuerpo femenino ponen de manifiesto las persistentes desigualdades que existen entre los hombres y la mujeres en la escuela de la arquitectura.

*Palabras clave:* Mujeres, arquitectura, revisión arquitectónica, interpretación, feminismo, teoría de la interpretación, cuerpo femenino.

## Resumo

Um componente fundamental da formação arquitetônica –a revisão arquitetônica– exige que os estudantes de arquitetura com frequência façam exposições diante de seus professores e colegas. A teoria da interpretação feminista e a história da representação do corpo feminino manifestam as persistentes desigualdades que existem entre os homens e as mulheres na escola da arquitetura.

*Palavras-chave:* arquitetura, corpo feminino, feminismo, interpretação, mulheres, revisão arquitetônica, teoria da interpretação.

## Elisa Iturbe

✉ [elisa.iturbe@gmail.com](mailto:elisa.iturbe@gmail.com)

Architect and critic, who teaches at Yale University, works at Eisenman Architects, and is founder of Outside Development. As a student at Yale she founded Equality in Design and now as an architect her architectural practice operates at the intersection of formal, political, and social theory.

In the context of architecture school, I was often asked why women feel there are lingering inequalities between males and females. Women have equal enrollment, women win awards, women are awarded with teaching assistantships, and their quality of our work is, for the most part, recognized. But there is a discomfort: a discomfort that is hard to name. As such, I would like to focus on the constitution of female identity within the context of architecture school.

Architecture schools are unique because student work is performed. Students are evaluated by means of reviews, critiques, and pin-ups, that are presented to an audience. Their performance, as well as their work, is evaluated by professors and peers, which for women brings up two important points. Firstly, the body is an integral part of the presentation, and it inevitably alludes to the historical role of the female body in the context of both performance and visual culture. Secondly, women's behavioral expectations vary inside and outside the walls of an architecture school, yet due to the nature of performance, they come into conflict at the moment of the architecture review.

### The female body performs

The representation of the female body has a long yet specific history in Western culture; it is a history that becomes engaged when women perform in front of an audience simply because

the audience arrives at the performance having already internalized certain dynamics of visual culture. These dynamics –shaped by film, painting, television, magazines, and so forth– affect how the female body is perceived, either in representation or in the flesh. For the purposes of this article, film can be used as a useful starting point. As a widely prevalent medium and as one of the most prolific image-producers in contemporary culture, film has had a profound effect on the female image, and all women are forced to contend with these images in their daily lives. Laura Mulvey's analysis of Hollywood film lays the groundwork for the kinds of assumptions that are at work in any contemporary audience. Ultimately this analysis can illuminate the dynamics that are at play in any performance and that shape the culture of architectural reviews.

According to Mulvey, in film, the appearance of the woman is "coded for strong visual and erotic impact."<sup>1</sup> Mulvey calls this the *to-be-looked-at-ness* of the female body. Women are displayed as erotic objects and as spectacles for both the characters within the film and the spectators in the audience. The male gaze projects its desire upon the female figure, who is "styled accordingly"<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile, the man in the film is a driver of action, separating spectacle from narrative and emerging "as the representative of power...as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring [the look] behind the screen to neutralize the extradiegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle."<sup>3</sup> In other words, the male not only

1 Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989. pg. 19.

2 Mulvey, 19.

3 Mulvey, 20.

drives the plot, but in the moment the male spectator identifies himself with the figure of the protagonist, he forms a narcissistic relationship with the character, enjoying a moment of ego reinforcement. As such, the pleasure of looking is split between an active male and a passive female.

So, men enjoy a moment of ego-reinforcement when viewing their own image on the screen, but what do women experience? While men become accustomed to seeing themselves in a position of both action and power, women become accustomed to seeing themselves as a spectacle. Hollywood film has changed since Mulvey's writing, but not before these archetypes of sex were broadly disseminated by a sexy and vivid medium that was to be extensively internalized by viewers. Even today these archetypes have a powerful hold over questions of identity and desire. So much so that the ability to engender desire has evolved into a central tenet of female identity, eventually to be considered a source of female empowerment. Female cultural icons in contemporary society rarely eschew or renounce their desirability. One can argue that such renunciation is not necessary, enough has changed in society. These women are not passively desired like Hollywood icons of old, for they have become active figures, empowered through the desire they willingly engender in all who consume their image. However, one can also argue that whether engendering desire passively or actively, women remain subservient to men's desire, to the burden of providing aesthetic pleasure. Female spectators self-identify with the object to be desired, and, in order to achieve moments of ego-reinforcement similar to those provided to male spectators, women embrace the burden of beauty and even take pride in espousing it. As a result, not much has fundamentally changed in the visual representation of women in our culture. Female beauty is standardized, mass produced, and profitable; it embraces heteronormativity to the degree of becoming heteroregressive. The standardized image of beauty—under which all women carry out their everyday lives—is per-

petually at play with other potential sources of identity-making.

### The male jury

In architecture school, these elements of visibility are at play during reviews because our bodies form part of the tableau as we present. The discomfort, however, is not simply about female beauty but more so about the constructed differences between beholding a male and a female that arise within a culture that embraces woman as spectacle. While no architectural critic will explicitly demand physical beauty from a female student, the wider societal context is one in which women are frequently prized more for their physical appearance than for their work or actions. Moreover, the specific context of the architecture school places women before predominantly male juries. This has an unstated but potentially significant impact for female presenters, not only because we inevitably engage the ingrained history of female representation to a male audience, but because we lose an opportunity for critics to self-identify with us and our work. It is easy to imagine a male professor seeing himself reflected in the performance of a male student, enjoying, as in film, a moment of ego-reinforcement, and unwittingly generating bias. Furthermore, female students must contend with the narrative of architectural history which features few leading females (or none, depending on the curriculum). With so few precedents of female protagonists existing in the minds of the male audience, male critics are likely to either subconsciously associate women with the familiar archetype of passive spectacle or impose upon them the model of action with which they are most familiar: the male protagonist. Or both. The result is that women are left with few opportunities for self-determination. Rather, we displace ourselves in order to reduce our own friction, visual archetypes, and cultural expectations of behavior. As Jill Dolan argues, as a woman performs, she moves towards or away from traditional expectations of women.<sup>4</sup> This is our wider cultural context, and we, as wo-

4 Dolan, Jill. *Feminist Spectator As Critic*. Ann Arbor, MI, USA: University of Michigan Press, 2012.


men, style ourselves accordingly. However, in architecture school, we also move towards or away from traditional expectations of men, which are the models of success largely molded by men in reviews, practice, and in history.

In architecture school, she also moves towards or away from traditional expectations of men, as the model of success in reviews, in practice, and in history, has been molded largely by men.

According to Judith Butler, the construction of sexuality is a performance that relies on a repetition of norms. Butler writes, “the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, in the moment that a gender norm is performed, that norm is both repeated and legitimized. Architecture school has put in place specific cultural norms. These are norms that may not be explicitly gendered but that carry the weight of a masculinized history and that perpetuate themselves in the ritualized performance of the architectural review. In other words, the architectural review, which originated in an all-male environment and favors the bold, paired with the images of success produced by a masculine narrative of architectural history, perpetually legitimizes specific gendered norms within the realm of architectural education.

This is not to say that the outspokenness and assertiveness expected and rewarded in studio culture are purely masculine qualities. The goal of this article is rather to point out certain cultural biases within architecture and to suggest that these may be in conflict with, not only wider cultural expectations, but also with our own expectations as women. The female body inhabits the intersection of multiple cultural forces, and, specifically in architecture school, cultural norms create conflict with architectural norms. Femininity is *expected* as our bodies engage visually in

our presentations and yet femininity is *rejected* as we are asked to speak loudly and boldly to an audience of men. At the same time, both phenomena reinforce traditional definitions of femininity. As such, men and women have different experiences in architecture school. For men, there is a continuity between behavioral expectations inside and outside of the school. In both contexts, confidence is desired, assumed, and rewarded. Architecture school is a place where a man can be a man. For those who do not embody traditional notions of masculinity (which, of course, includes both men and women), the discontinuity must be addressed on a regular basis.

The goal is not to assign specific behaviors to either gender, but rather to analyze how studio culture asks us to both perform and reject gender norms and create a condition in which women are constantly encountering barriers that prevent self-determination. This is the face of contemporary sexism. The explicit exclusion of women from the male sphere no longer exists; today's gender biases infuse our culture with demands to conform to basic behavioral patterns that are still divided along male/female lines. Furthermore, in architecture school, women have the added pressure of dealing with the hyper-femininity propagated by popular culture in contrast to the masculinity prevalent in architecture culture. Women are pulled in both directions, they must perpetually negotiate and often end up straddling or inhabiting the divide itself. This leads to a tacit discomfort: a discomfort that is hard to name. 

5 Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999. pg 178.