
UNIT 17 GENDER, SPACE AND ARCHITECTURE

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17.1 INTRODUCTION

Built environment is a broad-based and interdisciplinary term that refers to constructed surroundings, which provide the setting for human activities, ranging in scale from houses and public buildings to neighbourhoods and cities. Architecture is a predominant part of the built environment. It is the art and science of designing and constructing buildings. In fact, architecture is called the mother of all arts. Throughout history, architecture has been used as one of the most favored forms of expression of culture and political power. Great historical monuments (The Taj Mahal) or contemporary buildings (Le Corbusier's Chandigarh edifices) are generally associated with men as either designers or patrons. In a sense, buildings are a record of works done by those who have the power to build. Women have a rare visibility in this context, either in the past or, less so, in the contemporary times.

The broad aim of the unit is to open up new ways of thinking about gender and architecture and to investigate the significance of gender in the production and representation of spatial experiences.

17.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- Develop a clear understanding of how gender identities are constructed and performed and how spaces are engendered;
- Evaluate about women and the public as well as private realms in terms of space use; and
- Critically analyse contemporary issues of spatiality in their everyday life from the feminist perspective.

17.3 FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES AND ARCHITECTURE

Architecture (and the built environment) is largely perceived to be gender neutral. “Until now, disciplines interested in spatial questions such as architecture and city planning, have not been particularly interested in gender issues. One could almost maintain that gender, especially the female one, if related to space and its design is seen as something ‘impure’ which spoils the abstract and neutral purity of the whole discipline” (Lada, 2009, p.122). However, a major change in thinking about this relationship has occurred in the past two or three decades with the growing feminist knowledge cutting across all academic disciplines that challenge the conventional views. Gender has been included as an analytical category in social and other theories. The feminist perspective in architecture examines how the existing power and social relations in class, patriarchy and culture affect women’s access to private and public spaces as well as to the city at large, and how these factors in turn influence the shaping of the built environment.

Feminism has been one of the significant social movements of the twentieth century. It has had a vast and far-reaching impact on society at large, changing its very fabric and creating new identities for women. The women’s movement has affected both activism and scholarship in several fields in India such as health, literature, law, art, theatre and human development. Feminist theory has helped render the concept of gender visible from the 1970s and 1980s onwards. Though new courses, research and publications with this conceptual shift dealing with gender and the built environment has been undertaken in the West since the early 1980s, the related disciplines in the India lag far behind other fields in developing a body of knowledge. It is, nonetheless, crucial to create feminist awareness in theory and practice of architecture among the general public as well as the professionals. In reality, an inaudible dialogue occurs between the user and the built form and spatial practices produce social relationships. It is a mutually dependent phenomenon. These issues deal with our experiences and negotiations in day to day life which most of us have taken for granted.

Extreme forms of violence such, as dowry deaths, domestic abuses and foeticide are visible forms of discrimination towards women. However, the space-gender relationship is a subtle form of unequal conditioning in society. “In order to control women’s sexuality, production and reproduction, men need to control women’s mobility. The imposition of *parda*, restrictions on leaving the domestic space, a strict separation of private and public, limits on interaction between the sexes, and so on. Patriarchal values are reflected in built spaces constructed in the society. These range from the historic and clear division of *zenana/mardana* spaces in domestic architecture to the ambiguous denial of public space to women at tea and *paan* shops in modern cities” (Bhasin, 1993, p.9). It should be recognized; however, that gender forms just one of the categories along with age, occupation, social class, etc. of other marginalized citizens. The feminist issues concerning architecture can be listed in two broad categories: Women as creators and as consumers of space. We will be looking into the latter, though both are somewhat connected. This discourse is limited generally to urban middle class women; but there is an intense need to extend the inquiry to the rural scenario. Rural women rarely go to shops or the panchayat house as a rule. These sorts of impositions control women’s mobility and freedom in ways that are unique to them - that is, they are gender-specific, because men are not subjected to the same constraints.

17.4 DEFINITIONS

Architecture is the most visible cultural and/or political symbol of any civilization. It is also the physical expression of culture where space is not innate but is the setting of life and its various rituals/activities.

Gender differences are shaped by several determinants such as history, culture, religion and environment other than the biological differences between men and women. They play a role in theory as well as in everyday behavior settings of life.

The definition of space varies in different disciplines such as psychology, music, geography and anthropology. Leslie Weisman identifies three kinds of spaces: the physical, social and metaphysical. She explains, “In patriarchal societies where men are by definition the dominant group, social, physical and metaphysical space are the products of male experience, male consciousness and male control” (Weisman, 1994, p.10). On the other hand, Persis Ginwala, in her chapter on the Dalit women in Gujarat, defines women’s space as a voluntarily created ‘enclosure’ for support, relaxation, freedom and self-expression. Giving the example of wells and lakes, she says, “The creation of spaces, does not necessarily, or even usually, refer to actual creation. Rather, it is the use to which location and structures provided by patriarchy are put that constitutes the creation of a space”

(Franco, 2000, p.98). In the context of the built environment, however, the meaning is physical (but it is socially constructed) and literal or, at times, it is emotional space that is mentally inhabited.

17.5 WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

It is important to look at the women's movement in India, at this juncture. It has had a considerable impact, however, indirect and unconscious, on the women within the disciplines connected with the built environment. You have already read about the women's movement in India in Block I, Unit 1, 2, and 3 of MWG 001.

The first half of the twentieth century, during the colonial rule, was a crucial turning point for women in India. It was a time of an intense nationalist struggle for political freedom. The mass movement led by Mahatma Gandhi inspired a large-scale participation of women. They came out of their homes (read kitchens) and into the public realm in large numbers during this period. Gandhi categorically stated that "...the women of India tore down the *purdah* and came forward to work for the nation. They saw that their country demanded something more than looking after their homes..." (Kumar, 1997, p. 83). The women dressed simply in hand-spun Khadi, participated in underground movements and courted arrest to go to jail. Others bravely looked after their families single-handedly if their men were in jails for a long period of time. Though feminist critics have pointed out that this was primarily directed against the British rule and the questions about women's own domination within the domestic sphere were ignored in a patriarchal society, the positive result cannot be historically negated. The 1940s was also a time when a few elite women chose to become architects in the country.

As the second half of the century progressed, it became a period of major transition for women as Indian society underwent tremendous economic, technological, socio-cultural, and political changes after gaining independence in 1947 from the British rule. The Indian Constitution proudly promised equality between genders to all citizens. New work ethics, technology and lifestyles were introduced. Higher education for girls became more wide spread, at least in the urban areas. Selected women had political appointments and many women's organizations came up. A significant number became employed in typical feminine occupations such as teaching, nursing and secretarial work. Gradually, the old ways of life that defined women and men's roles in the society began to get altered. Family structure, household organizations, and lifestyles were gradually modified. The forces of influence included a reduction in the number of children, encouragement for advanced and/or professional education, acceptance of women's employment outside of home, predominance of nuclear families and less

significant role of kinship and caste. Women increasingly experienced an inner urge for freedom, self-expression, and self-development. Nevertheless, then and even now, women are primarily considered caretakers of children and managers of household activities/resources. Working women have to take care of house, employment and children simultaneously.

Further, education fuelled a desire in women for being in the mainstream public space and gaining recognition. Thus, the identity of Indian women underwent a dramatic remake in the past century. On the other hand, some critics believe that, “The critical consciousness gained during the freedom struggle-as well as women’s access to a political arena provided by it-was lost to a great extent” (Khullar, 2005, p.10). This had to be gradually regained in the ensuing decades, the turning point coming in the 1990s. Nevertheless, the positive impact of the social and other changes was seen in the context of architecture as the rather young profession began to branch away from engineering. In the 1960s and 1970s, an increasing number of girls opted for the profession of architecture, setting a trend for future generations to follow.

17.6 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

With their roots in draftsman’s courses, the discipline of architecture developed a separate identity from engineering through the twentieth century. The profession remained the prerogative of men after Independence in 1947. Even at the turn of the twenty-first century, one can perceive an invisible hold of patriarchal culture on the profession, which is rooted deep in the design and construction industries. As in other parts of the world, there is a substantial and worrisome discrepancy between the number of female students (about 50 % and more) and women practicing in the field (about 11 to 12%). (RIBA, 2003) This is in contrast to other areas of the design fields such as fashion, graphics, textiles and perhaps even interior design where women have gathered the critical mass. Spousal practices in architecture where the architect wife’s responsibilities are often limited to the office and husband predominantly meets with clients/contractors and conducts site visits are more of a rule and not an exception. It is a difficult profession for women. At the same time, there are women who have worked hard and have been able to carve out an identity for them. They negotiated the various forces of resistance while venturing into the public realm, sometimes with non-conventional approaches and attitudes, to reach a level of success. Unfortunately, they are generally unaware of the impact of the women’s movement on their personal and professional lives and tend to ignore gender issues. For a sensitive and aware designer the challenge is to delve into the lifestyle and other needs of the women and to translate them into the structuring of space.

The built environments in India had been designed and built by master carpenters and guilds of craftsmen till the advent of the colonial and post colonial eras. Thus, the discipline of architecture is relatively young in India. In addition, even today men take most of the decisions regarding what gets built and how, in government, corporate sector and as developers. Most of the consultants are also male throughout the building industry. Even women workers are relegated to the unskilled, low paying sector for decades. Within this scenario, the tradition of research and scholarship has been difficult to establish in architecture in the post-Independence period. The profession in India being design-oriented, there is least importance given to creation of theoretical knowledge, nor are there any efforts made to synthesize design and research. All these factors hinder a deeper understanding and discourses relating to the feminist perspective in production and consumption of built space.

17.7 GENDER AND SPACE

Social, political, and economic forces and values shape the built environment and its form. Spatial arrangements of buildings reflect and reinforce existing gender, race and class relations because space is socially constructed and the appropriation of space is a political act. “Spatial segregation is one of the mechanisms by which a group with greater power can maintain its advantage over a group with less power. By controlling access to knowledge and resources through the control of space, the dominant group’s ability to retain and reinforce its position is enhanced” (Spain, 1992, p.16).

At various levels, from the city to the neighborhood and from institutions to the dwelling, the ideals and reality about the relationship between men and women is expressed in the built form. The patterns of behavior within private and public spaces are culturally learned and accepted as a way of life. Cultural rules that are often internalised govern the use of space and codes regulate behavior between genders. Most males and females are unaware of this spatial discrimination and take their behavior for granted. The use of the *purdah* or the *ghunghat* is a means of controlling women’s bodies and their spatial interaction. The system of *purdah*, to keep women secluded in the home in a space safe from unregulated sexual contact, unfortunately also served to restrict women’s educational and economic opportunities. Though caste, community, class, region, ethnicity and other variables affect spatial interactions, women form the primary focus of this unit’s discourse.

The socialization process in early years in life shapes the self-image of the girl child, affecting all aspects of her character as she grows up, especially her identity and contribution in the public domain. In Indian society, girls internalize space use and behavior including posture, dressing and speech as they grow up and are taught the norms of feminine modesty. Space for

a girl child is fluid till puberty after which there is a turning point that brings about a change in the attitude towards her. This is not only in terms of the social perceptions of her body but also her physical movements. The fact that women are inferior beings is taught to them from childhood. Their desire for social approval does not allow them to question these norms. As a result, their perceptions differ due to the social construction and their own spatial experiences in private and public realms.

In the early research on gender and space in the 1970s and the 1980s it was standard to explain the broad male/female spatial divide by the public/private binary. It still generally holds true but there are further theoretical developments. For example, Seemanthini Niranjana has pointed out the grey areas in it. She says, “There are continuous shifts and transformations in how these spaces are characterized, since they acquire and shed meaning according to context...Rather, the boundaries of these spaces are constantly being specified and re-specified, contextually and in practice” (Niranjana, 2001, p.110). In another excellent article, Janaki Abraham concludes that every day practices constitute both space and gender. Through her study of the veiling practices of women in the small town of Bikaner, she further shows that in traditional cultures women’s spatial needs are produced and created in a shifting manner rather than being fixed or given. A woman’s relationship to people in a given space is crucial to her experience of that space (Abraham, 2010, p. 214-215). However, for our purpose, we will look at the spatiality of the public as well as private spaces and their negotiations by women.

Check Your Progress 1:

Visit a nearby public park. Describe what you see there in terms of gender and space?

17.8 PUBLIC SPACES: POWER AND ACCESS

Are public spaces in cities really designed for use by all ‘publics’ alike? Or do men and women actually perceive and experience them differently? How does the everyday production of gendered public space occur through the physical activities and social life of men and women? Do both the genders have equal access and right to the public space? These are some of the questions we need to ask. For a city, public spaces are important as they reflect the culture of the citizens. Ramya Haran says that the concept of a public space in India is very different; traditionally there were no civic

or public nodes that were planned and there was no culture of public spaces. Most of them occurred near institutions or markets. In fact, many of them were bazaars (Haran, 2010, p.37). This has changed in contemporary times. Therefore, here we are using a rather broad definition of public space to include streets, parks, shopping malls, railway and bus stations as well as public toilets among others.

A space that does not support gender equality is a gendered space. By that definition many of our public spaces are gendered, though the general perception is otherwise. How is that so? Women often feel unwelcome, directly or indirectly and have to confront (or have fear of) some form of verbal, visual or physical/sexual harassment in many of these places. In fact, “the fear and insecurity that women face in accessing public spaces prevents them from availing the benefits of being an urban citizen” (Vishwanath & Mehrotra, 2007, p.1542). Women feel most uncomfortable in male dominated, hang out spaces such as *paan* shops, tea stalls and other urban corners. Therefore, they are often confined to the periphery and those who do not follow the accepted social codes of behavior become potential victims of violence. In addition, women are specifically excluded, for example, from places of worship, such as in the mosque where women are not allowed to pray in most Islamic communities or the Hindu temple that is generally out of bounds for ‘impure’ women. Ranade points out that the control of women’s movement has been central to the maintenance of a gender regime informed by patriarchy. She further states that “When comparing men and women of the same class and community, men have better access to public space at all times of the day. Women have to manufacture an appearance of purpose to legitimately access public space” (Ranade, 2007, p. 1525).

In an elaborate article Phadke states that shopping malls, multiplexes and coffee shops are privatised spaces that masquerade as public while manufacturing an illusion of a public modernity (Phadke, 2007, 1514). It is obvious that because of the nature of the architecture of these places, its use is limited to a certain class of women (and men). In fact, these edifices project a glamorous contemporary and rich lifestyle that in it could be a deterrent to the ‘others’.

The near total absence of public toilets for women in all Indian cities (and villages) is a blot on our vision of the civilized democratic society. The common sight of men urinating in streets and open spaces is a blatant example of them appropriating space without any second thoughts! Ranade argues that the lack of or inadequacy of public toilets is more than a mere inconvenience for women; it is a denial of their public policy rights.

In traditional societies, women are generally not encouraged to ride vehicles and often do not own one which curtails their freedom to enter spaces

compared to the men. “Mobility, or access to physical space, is an indicator of power because it brings with it access to people, resources, information and opportunities... [it] is a strong signal of individual autonomy investing the individual with a sense of responsible adulthood” (Franco, 2004, p.98). Public space robs women of anonymity and their rights as citizens to participate fully.

In India, physical planning is largely in the hands of the government that binds it to bureaucratic procedures. In the planning process, the neutrality of the user is taken-for-granted and the element of people’s participation is minimal. There are no finer guidelines in terms of the implementation of the rules. Disadvantaged groups like old people, children or women do not find any special reference nor are their perceptions sought. In addition, creative interpretations of the byelaws are not encouraged. Most cities have a few large parks located far apart that become unavailable to women and children if they cannot afford the transport expenses. Gender sensitive planning would allocate smaller gardens for each neighborhood. The lack of good infrastructure, such as mass transport network, put women at a disadvantage, as they often do not have access to an individual vehicle. In general, the planners’ own perceptions are determined by their class and gender background, therefore there is a wide gap between their assumptions and the social reality.

17.9 DOMESTIC SPACES: SOCIAL ROLES AND PRIVACY RULES

Patriarchy is seen in its most intense form in the institution of family and the concept of the household. By and large, women’s relationship to the house is mediated through the man: father, husband, and/or son, reinforcing the patriarchal relationships. Patriarchy also demands that they be confined to the domestic space as far as possible. There are also other considerations to women being limited to the domestic realm. For example, “Inadequacies in dwellings, community amenities and infrastructure play a major role in intensifying this domestic work...Lack of essential services such as domestic water supply and solid waste disposal systems have a great impact on women’s lives” (Shreshtha, 2000, p. 449-457).

Nevertheless, the house remains the prime space for the woman, creating an intimate and predictable world for her. At times, this could become a constricting environment but mostly it is not perceived as such. Because a woman has close ties with the males in a patriarchal society, her resistance in the domestic sphere remains muted, if at all. Through it she seeks her social position in the community. She strongly identifies with it and it almost becomes a symbol of self for her since she is responsible for the image of the ‘ideal home’. This works both ways. “Women’s groups

investigating 'dowry deaths' demonstrated how the designation of the family as private domain restricted women's access to protection against domestic violence" (Tharu & Niranjana, 1997, p. 232-260). It is also clearly manifested in case of a divorce where, in a majority of cases, the woman has to move out of the marital home, making the experience extremely traumatic for her psychologically and physically due to the loss of a shelter.

On the other hand, the street is predominantly a men's identified territory where they belong, not as individuals but as groups, making their presence and domination visible and stronger. They occupy an amorphous physical space outside the home. As mentioned above, the spatial divisions are not static and the boundary between male and female cannot be clearly drawn: it is the result of complex settlements and negotiations; it may vary during day/night as well as during different seasons. The same is also true in the private spaces that men and women use whether it is in villages or in the city.

In traditional cultures, a woman's position within a society plays a role in the architecture of a house. The Bohras, an Islamic community in Gujarat, for example, have adapted the house form of the majority Hindus and have modified it to suit their lifestyle, gender requirements being one of them. The dwellings has a linear and hierarchical spatial configuration, going from public to private, where it is invisibly divided into two parts: the front portion being semi-public in nature for men and the back part, more private with controlled access to outsiders (non-family members) for women. The spaces are multifunctional compared to the specifically labeled ones in contemporary houses/apartments. The central courtyard, important from the gender viewpoint, forms the imaginary divide between the two zones. The courtyard allows women maximum freedom of movement within the house, with little need for external windows while eliminating the possibility of their being viewed by outsiders. It also provides good ventilation to the interiors where women spend most of their time. For formal occasions, male guests are entertained in the main hall located on the upper or top floor, directly accessible through the stairs placed in the front portion of the house so that the privacy of the women is protected (Desai, 2007, p. 94). In the Hindu settlements in the same towns, one finds more use of the semi open *otlas* at the front which are occupied by men in the mornings (to read the paper) and the evenings (to socialise) while the women use the same space in the afternoons to either do household work or to chitchat.

On the other hand, the bungalow is a house form initially developed by the British for the military cantonments and other settlements. During the twentieth century, it was taken up by the Indians and developed in a variety of ways in different regions of the country. In its evolution in Gujarat, it was found that the private domain of women got gradually more defined as the decades went by and the position of women improved in the

society. The kitchen which was separately located behind the house gradually got attached, representing the increasing importance and value of the woman of the house within the family. In the post-Independence period, as the living-dining spaces got combined, the kitchen was well-connected to them. The same configuration can be found in the apartments, thus reducing the spatial segregation of the genders considerably (Desai, 2007, 164-165).

Thus, within the home, there are sub-spaces which are relatively public and private, such as living/dining in contrast to the bedrooms. Investment in any space in order to improve its quality depends upon the importance ascribed to that space. For example, in most interiors of a home, when the head of the household decides to redecorate the living/dining areas, the kitchen, the woman's domain, is often marginalised. From the rural households to the middle class contemporary apartments, the kitchens are relatively small in size and are placed away from the outer world. The professional not being gender sensitive, these issues hardly ever get addressed. Given this situation, what can be done in contemporary times?

Check Your Progress 2:

Do you know of any house which has some space dedicated exclusively to women? Is it common in your area? Point out the gendered differences of spaces in such houses.

17.9 FUTURE SCENARIO

In the twenty first century when the gender system is gradually being challenged and restructured, there is a crisis in feminine as well as masculine identities. The society needs to respond to both. There is no reason why we cannot imagine a better scenario for the spatial integration of gender as societies change and get more and more globalized. Public transport, public toilets and design issues like good lighting (especially for public toilets and bus stops), footpaths and location of neighborhood parks have to be integrated in architectural and planning programs of cities. Conducting safety audits from a gender viewpoint should be a regular feature. As real estate prices boom and mass housing dominates the market, there is a great danger of gender considerations getting lost in the economics of urban land. The contemporary, globalizing landscape is full of new spaces of consumption such as shopping malls and multiplexes which should to be

analyzed from the gender angle. We also need to study other building types such as offices and public institutions as more and more women join the workforce. It is not sufficient to respond to the existing social set up but we need to integrate services such as crèches, childcare centers, convenient shopping and community kitchens to provide facilities for workingwomen. Jos Boys believes that we need to be radical in working towards new building types such as women's centers offering the re-allocation of resources (land, facilities and spaces) to those who had not previously had access. She also recommends that we re-view the attitudes and assumptions through which much built space is designed (Boys, 2009, p. 20 & 30). We must move towards a more inclusive city.

17.10 LET US SUM UP

From the above, we can see a pattern emerging of the underlying social structure and its mutual relationship with space, in other words, the spatiality of social life. Architecture in terms of use and production is not gender neutral and women are subjected to discrimination which is often invisible. There are broad divisions of public and private spaces in the city/ neighborhood and dwelling, however, the boundaries are not fixed or final but are flexible as well as shifting and women negotiate them as within the social/religious/economic frameworks at all levels. Taking this reality, the contemporary society and professionals need to not only respond to the existing scenario but also work at multiple dimensions in the fields of design, planning and policy.

17.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Which are the important landmarks/public spaces in your city? Observe the men and women using them at different times of the day in view of the above discussion and map the gendered geography of one selected space.
- 2) Where do the women from your neighborhood go for recreation/pleasure activities? Discuss this in the context of space and gender.
- 3) Do you see any differences in the home of a joint family and that of a nuclear one in terms of how gender and space relations are played out everyday in life? Discuss.
- 4) How does an apartment building differ from a bungalow or a traditional house from the gender viewpoint?
- 5) Observe the men and women using a multiplex and a coffee shop and write down your conclusions.

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