Chapter 1
Gender as a Category of Analysis in Vernacular Architecture Studies

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There is a growing awareness among scholars in many fields that gender is an important area for study. Most now agree that gender is an experiential and analytical category as fundamental as class or race. Therefore, my purpose in this essay is not to suggest ways to “add women and stir” in order to arrive at some more fair version of experience that incorporates women’s lives into a history written in male terms. Rather, I want to move directly to the issue of how we can make gender an integral part of our research. In this essay, I shall focus on some ways I think gender can open up new avenues for understanding the history of the design and experience of vernacular environments. My task here is to challenge and to encourage—and perhaps to provoke—further discussion of this issue by providing some approaches to using gender as a category of analysis.

When new topics or issues are introduced into the scholarly debate, the need for new methods often seems imperative. And indeed new methods can be helpful in getting at difficult research problems. Sometimes, however, the call for new methods can become a way to avoid the issues. In that light, I would like to take a position that runs counter to the usual academic notion that new problems need new methods and argue that in order to incorporate gender we do not need any new methods. Vernacular architecture studies already have borrowed just about every useful method that is available. It seems to me, however, that while we do not need new tools, we could use some different blueprints. It is not what we use to build, in other words, but how we conceptualize our research problems that needs to be redesigned if gender is to be a revealing category of analysis in understanding vernacular architecture. Just for the record, no one, to my knowledge, has ever claimed that using gender as a category of historical analysis would be easy.

I should begin with a definition. By “gender” I do not mean “women,” although the term is often used that way as a kind of politically neutral shorthand. By gender I refer instead to a set of abstractions rooted in biology and expressed in social, cultural, and historical terms. Gender differences build on the biological fact that males and females have different sex organs and different reproductive functions. This biology inherently has no history: the existence of reproductive organs is timeless. They were present in prehistory (or we would not be here), and they have been with us ever since. Unlike biological sex differences, however, gender does have a history because it is a social creation that changes according to ethnic, cultural, religious, economic, national, racial, and temporal differences, among others. Gender, then, is a system of interrelated ideas about men’s and women’s social roles, self-definition, and cultural experience that is grounded in the historical process. It is closest to class as a socially constructed category of human experience, but it is also like race in that it is based in biological fact but expressed in cultural terms.

Gender is a concept that includes both men and women, manhood and womanhood, and other
definitions of self that build on biological sex. We have two genders; some cultures have three and even four. We have heterosexual dominance, but we also have gay and lesbian people who have historically used manhood and womanhood to define a non-heterosexual cultural experience. There are people, such as a student at the University of Kansas in the late 1980s, who insist they are sexually neutral and refer to themselves as "it." While the biological is embedded in the cultural aspects of gender, it is the cultural expressions of gender that have the most bearing on the study of vernacular architecture, since it is in culture that human choice and creativity are found.

With this definition of gender in mind, I would like to describe briefly four ways of thinking about gender that I believe would be useful to research on the gendered dimensions of vernacular architecture. I then will provide several specific examples in which I see gender operating in ways that force us to modify our interpretations of vernacular architecture. These are neither exclusive nor definitive; I offer them here simply as a basis for discussion.

First, gender is a structural category. It encompasses the underlying notions of manhood, womanhood, and/or other gender divisions in social, economic, and ideological systems. In our western, Anglo-dominated society, patriarchal structure is both idealized and a reality. It appears in the labor market, where women continue to earn sixty cents for every dollar a man earns. It appears in ritual, where brides are still "given away" by their fathers. Men give women engagement rings to cement their property rights against the claims of other men. Men, however, do not themselves accept a similar token of exclusive rights.

Reality does not always conform to ideal, however. Despite assertions of male dominance, for example, recent literature on business management has argued that male managers should learn their interpersonal skills from women, who, some claim, are more empathetic and other-directed than men. Some claim that the recent appearance of a "men's movement" grows out of men's sense of their economic and social subordination. Finally, there are those who believe that social gender is directly linked to biology. Some people on both the right and left of the political spectrum claim that women's hormones dictate a predisposition to nurturance and empathy and men's hormones a tendency to violence and insularity.

Structural patriarchy also must acknowledge racial, sexual, and ethnic differences. Right now, unemployment levels are high for everyone, but highest for black men, who consistently have higher unemployment levels than any other group. Gay men are subject to beatings by gangs of "straight" thugs. This theme, I might add, is often couched in spatial terms: for example, the city streets of Rod Stewart's song "Georgie Boy" or the playground violence that ends the life of Matthew Broderick's character in the film Torch Song Trilogy. Not all men, in other words, benefit equally from structural patriarchy. Any gender system, therefore, will have both dominant and contested meanings: ideals that are held as culturally important and challenges to those ideals that complicate the dominant structure.

Second, gender is a chronological category. Gender systems are subject to historical flux and perhaps can themselves stimulate change. For example, the notion of "separate spheres," which has guided so much of the research in women's history and shaped gender studies, grew out of trying to understand the nature of patriarchy. It has, however, proved too simple as an overall organizing principle for the study of women, men, or gender because it is specific to a particular time—the nineteenth century—a particular class—the middle class—and a particular racial group—whites. While that group has had power to impose its own gender norms on others in the form of laws and regulations, "separate spheres" is neither a description nor an organizing assumption that has proven universally useful.
Sally McMurry’s work on the evolution of farm family dwellings in the nineteenth century provides an excellent critique of the separate spheres notion and modifies it in useful ways. She emphasizes the economic distinctions of separate gender spheres in urban and rural life, and she shows the ways rural men and women defined their economic, social, and familial positions first in contradiction to and then in subversion of urban gender roles. In McMurry’s work, separate spheres is a complex set of relationships between men and women, work and home, farm and family space, and urban and rural experience that simultaneously highlights the connections as well as the conflicts between men’s and women’s worlds.

Race and class also complicate the model of separate spheres over time. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, ideas about manhood and womanhood stressed social and legal differences, but emphasized sexual, racial, and class similarities. In the nineteenth century, with the evolution of the white, middle-class notion of separate spheres, white men’s and women’s economic, social, and sexual roles sharply diverged in both theory and practice, even as differences of class and race developed that created complex gender categories. The sexuality of white men, lower-class women, and men and women of color recalled the earlier seventeenth- and eighteenth-century emphasis on human sexuality as based on uncontrollable and animalistic urges, while middle-class white men and women defined the sexuality of white middle-class women as pure, passionless, and reproductive.

Third, gender is a fragmented category. Any dominant gender system will engage different people in different ways and will create multiple layers of experience. One of the best examples of this is the way in which gender complicates the history of the family. The family is not and never has been an emotional or experiential unit, despite its predominately patriarchal structure. Men and women, children and adults, boys and girls, and parents and siblings are not necessarily vested in the family in the same way. Some historians, in fact, see the family as the basic unit of social and political struggle over allocation of resources, control over reproductive issues, and the sexual division of labor. Thus, to talk about a “house” or even a farmstead as a single unit of construction and experience is inaccurate, since men, women, and children make different contributions to the shape of family life. It is especially inaccurate if the paradigm of that experience is male, since women’s predominant place of work throughout our history has been within the household. Joan Jensen’s research on early-nineteenth-century rural Pennsylvania, for example, demonstrates women’s critical economic and technological role as butter makers. Not only did women’s butter making help bring the farm family into the national market economy and represent a crucial gender-linked set of skills and interests, but it also reshaped the material technology of butter making as women adapted boards and churns to increase their production.

Fourth, gender is an experiential category. Individuals and groups, variously constituted and acting in various capacities, may experience gender in different ways. Like race but unlike class, gender is simultaneously a private, intimate, personal category and a public, communal, social expression of self. Like class and race, gender can link the individual to society in personal, forceful ways.

For example, the history of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century city will be forever incomplete without a comprehensive treatment of the rise of gay and lesbian urban culture. In the cities, gender became a way to define the self against the dominant culture’s expectations for individual behavior. In turn, this complex play of self-defined and culturally imposed “deviance” became the foundation for urban spaces, which acted as “bohemian zones”: places where gay and lesbian men and women led the way in creating alternative identities, economies, and communities. These ur-
ban bohemian zones reached both inward—to provide safe and economically viable places for a persecuted minority—and outward—to the possibilities for self-definition those urban spaces helped present and embody for all city dwellers.

Thus gender as a category of analysis is as complex as race or class, and as useful as race or class to understanding historical change. Gender analysis demands no methodology vastly different from any used in historical study. One of the most revealing discussions of gender in Native-American workplaces, for example, used time-honored archaeological fieldwork techniques to uncover task differentiation among the Hidatsa Indians. A recent book on Native-American architecture uses photographs, drawings, paintings, oral histories, and the written records of anthropologists—all traditional historical documents—to link gender to housing construction. In the latter book, understanding gender was not the primary aim; rather, an awareness of the ways dwellings, work, and cosmology were gendered simply was part of the overall analysis.

What is different in using gender as a category of analysis is the level of awareness and the added complexity that gender demands of historical reconstruction. What, then, should be kept in mind about gender when studying vernacular architecture? What can using gender as a category of analysis tell us about the built environment? Let me suggest four areas in which I think gender would be useful in reconceptualizing vernacular architecture. As my examples, I will interpolate some well-known essays in the field of vernacular architecture studies. In doing so, my intent is not to castigate any of the authors for essays they did not write. Rather, I am using them because they are exemplary essays by prominent and well-known experts in the field, and therefore pieces with which most students of vernacular architecture are already familiar. I would like to use them to think about ways we might push our usual methods, and what we already know, a step or two closer to a gendered analysis.

First, the study of vernacular architecture will have to be very inclusive of subject material if the gender of environments is to be understood. Many contributions to vernacular architecture are ephemeral, a fact particularly true in the case of women. In our historical experience of gender, the trappings and interior decorations of buildings, some of which are seasonal, are important to the meaning and experience of vernacular space. To understand gender in everyday spatial expression, we may have to go to artifacts other than the building to understand the building as an environment.

To suggest some ways the inclusion of gendered ephemera would expand our understanding of vernacular space, I would like to build on Dell Upton's famous study of Anglican parish churches. Upton found women acting as sextons (or janitors), as wives and daughters of elite men, and they were segregated in the lower-status seating areas of the church. Thus, Upton's portrait of women's participation in vernacular space emphasizes their subordination to men's definitions of that space. We know, however, that it was women's work as seamstresses to provide special vestments, robes, and other ornamental elements for church worship. A study that included these ephemera would throw the status implications of church participation into a different and more complexly gendered light.

Official positions within the parish church may not, in fact, exhaust the gendered experience of eighteenth-century church going in Virginia. Laurel Ulrich has argued that New England women also took part in status definitions through their struggles over seating space in church. Further, both men and women contributed in different ways to the status of a family. A man might have the trappings of wealth, but it was his wife who cemented elite status through careful management of household goods, servants, and children. In other words, although the cultural ideal of seventeenth-century Anglo-America was female submission and male dominance, the reality seems to have been much more contested and open to interpretation.
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Second, attention to gender suggests that the same places and social messages may be interpreted by men and women in different ways. Carol Gardner tested Erving Goffman's sociology of public place by subjecting it to gender variables. Gardner's findings suggest men and women approach public space very differently. Using standard anthropological field study techniques and oral interviews, Gardner found that women were not at ease with social interactions such as wolf whistles or even asking a stranger the time of day in a public place. For men, these activities signaled openings for encounters; for women, they could be threatening. This fear of public places led women to invent complex imaginary identities that included pretending they were waiting for a man when they were not. What Goffman took for granted in public space—that male experience defined public encounters and that those encounters were experienced in the same way by men and women—turned out not to be true. Gardner used no innovative new methods to gain these insights; she merely approached her study with an eye to gender differences between men and women.

Third, gender ideologies can have an impact on the experience and definition of space that can complicate or add to other meanings. Here I would like to use Robert Blair St. George's fascinating essay “Set Thine House in Order” about the changes in domestic space that took place in seventeenth-century New England. Leaving aside the fact that St. George treated both the barn and house as male space (an unrealistic assessment given the work roles of seventeenth-century New England women), let me point to his intriguing insight about the spatial attitudes of one New England farmer, William Morse of Newbury, Massachusetts. Morse, he observes, experienced the walls of the house as a thin membrane separating the rational, domestic order from the irrational, supernatural tumult of nature. For Morse, St. George argues, the world outside the house was filled with spirits, with witches, with all the wild and uncontrolled urges of the devil's company.

What happens to this sense of clear boundaries, however, if we add that in seventeenth-century New England, as Carol Karlsen has demonstrated, witchcraft and the supernatural were gendered? Most witches were women, and it was women's proximity to nature and the animal world that allowed them to make cows go dry and children to be born with deformities. This is not to say St. George was wrong about Morse; perhaps house walls were boundaries. But Morse also lived with the supernatural world in the form of his mother, his wife, his sisters, and his daughters. The supernatural was both outside and inside, although in different forms. Was there a way that the houses and barns, the steads and lofts, the workplaces and living spaces were divided to keep out the darkness outside and also to keep the darkness within the family—in the form of women—contained? I do not propose to answer these questions; I merely raise them to suggest that while St. George was onto something, his interpretation of the meaning of house walls could be enriched by the dimension of gender.

Fourth, gender can add to our understanding of the transmission of dwelling types and other built forms and to our understanding of the way culture and history modify those types. Dominant gender systems never stand alone in any social or temporal context, but rather play against multiple systems that may involve different classes, ethnicities, and races, and may take us beyond national boundaries.

Another familiar essay can elaborate this point. John Michael Vlach's path-breaking study of the shotgun house is an eclectic bit of detective work that clearly ranged far from the national, ethnic, regional, and racial boundaries initially set for this well-known southern housing form. From New Orleans to Haiti to the Arawak Caribbean to Nigeria, Vlach traced the development of this architectural type through the slave trade. This essay is a model for precisely the kind of informed, creative approach we must have to understand gender and vernacular architecture. I would like to use Vlach's
method as a pattern and merely approach the shotgun from a slightly different direction.

The famous Nigerian novelist, Buchi Emecheta, has written extensively on the role of women and the family in Yoruba and Ibo tribal experience. Her books contain vivid fictionalized portrayals of the social life of family compounds and the spatial uses of the twentieth-century Ibo equivalent of the shotgun dwelling. Where Vlach traces a housing type and makes a point about slavery, Emecheta's stories suggest questions about the social functions of this housing type, and specifically the role of the compound in defining and shaping men's and women's cultures. Combined with what we know about the gender divisions of slavery—the ways in which African and African-American slaves created extended families, non-exclusive parenting, and communal living spaces—we could reveal not only the continuation of a particular architectural form but also the ways that form supported particular cultural constructions of manhood, womanhood, family, and communal experience.

Again, I do not intend to make all these connections in this essay. Rather, I raise these examples to suggest that the lack of a method for incorporating gender is not the problem. We have the methods; we even have as precedent the thoughtful, nuanced work of scholars like Upton, Gardner, St. George, Vlach, and others. What is needed is the sense that gender matters, that it acts in powerful and compelling ways, that it can reveal important aspects of the history of the built environment that otherwise would go unexplored. For the sake of discussion, I would argue that gender is not an optional category, any more than race or class are optional, if we are to reconstruct the story of the ways humans have created and experienced their built environments.

Notes


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10. The literature on these shifts is voluminous. A good summary can be found in Estelle Freedman and John D’Emilio, *Intimate Matters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).


