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On Margins: Feminist Architectural Histories of Migration

Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi and Rachel Lee
The "Feminist Architectural Histories of Migration" project labours in concert with a growing body of initiatives to write feminist histories of modern architecture through collaborative and intersectional historiographic practices. These redistribute power, co-produce solidarity, and reassess objects and methods that have been turned to with regularity in architectural history. We credit and attempt to extend that platform.¹

The broader project follows two premises, as does this themed section and related contributions within this issue of Architecture Beyond Europe. The first is that the dynamic of a situated and re-situated perspective is foundational to feminist histories of architecture. The second is that feminist historiographical approaches destabilize presumptions of fixity that have driven the writing of architectural histories. With the goal of opening architectural historiography to narratives, perspectives, and practices based on these arguments, in this issue, we present histories that together employ feminist methods and gather empirical studies of women’s work, which emerged from acts and experiences of migration performed individually or collectively. We see these as narratives of migration into and out of geographies of control and subjugation, beyond gender or gender framings, across lifeworlds.

In narratives of migrants who were identified with architectural modernism in the most conventional sense, who crossed borders in the colonial and postcolonial worlds, we have found repeated instances in which they focus on the vernacular, the folkloric,
the everyday, the “anonymous.” A transnational, cosmopolitan mobility oriented several such figures toward proving grounds outside established sociocultural, geographical, and professional territory, in which they generated debates on heritage, regionalism, and the everyday. In short, their migrations turned a lens on culture as architecture. Their practices posited architecture not as exceptional, but as entangled with many other forms of cultural production. We argue that the view of a stranger conditioned Sybil Moholy-Nagy’s fascination with the grain silo and other utilitarian American architectures, or spurred Lina Bo Bardi to curate and narrate the material culture of Bahia, as examples.

In narratives of migrants whose designs, built forms, and constructed environments have not been understood as authored, or of anonymous objects illegible within historical frameworks, we have found instances of empowering links between mobility and architectural forms and practices. The authority embodied by certain migratory works—camps built by refugees, exhibitions curated by exiled artists, urban spaces seized by protestors, radical journals circulated ephemerally—poses a meaningful challenge to the legitimacies and stabilities architecture purportedly offers. Writing feminist architectural histories of migration demands seeing the bodies of labourers within the grid of authorship, acknowledging the spatial practices of occupation by activists or prisoners, engaging the obscured work of teachers, researchers, and writers, studying material environments built by migrants, and naming homemakers and others whose designated use of architecture endowed it with value. Such iterations, which may have lacked signature but not significance, created or unsettled architectural discursivity and enacted forms of power predicated upon migration and mobility, or their mirrors, restriction and confinement.

Thinking with architectural histories

It is within the context of these two thrusts that we position the essays in this section. They make reference to forms of modernism as defined according to strictest convention, illustrating the “other modernisms” that historians such as Hilde Heynen and Esra Akcan have conceptualized and critiqued. They also refer to the world of architectures whose authors have not been well known or knowable, or have perhaps proffered alternates to authorship so radical so as not to have been acknowledged as such.

Sophie Hochhäusl’s essay, “‘Dear Comrade’ or Exile in a Communist World: Resistance, Feminism and Urbanism in Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky’s Work in China, 1934/1956,” draws on substantial archival research and a close reading of Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky’s written records, in the form of correspondence, journal entries, notes and book manuscripts. Hochhäusl traces Schütte-Lihotzky’s travels through China and analyses her subsequent reflections on them. Through her focus on textual works, Hochhäusl recuperates writing in various forms—sketches, reports, memoir—as a significant mode of architectural production. Her critical feminist intervention combats conventions of architectural history, which continue to privilege projective design and visual imagery as the sole or most significant evidence of architectural labour. Hochhäusl’s scrupulous reconstructions of Schütte-Lihotzky’s exiles and travels interrogate their potential at once as authoritative forms of spatial inhabitation and feminist practices of seeing. Rather than simply expand the reader’s understanding of
Schütte-Lihotzky’s oeuvre to underscore the significance of her major designed or built works, Hochhäusl deploys a situated biographical study of Schütte-Lihotzky to critically interrogate her practices and illuminate shifts in global geopolitics and their impacts on constructed environments and architectural thinking during a radically transformative period in China and the world.

7 In her essay, “On Contradictions: The Architecture of Women’s Resistance and Emancipation in Early twentieth Century Iran,” Armaghan Ziaee addresses how reformist architectural and urban policies—an Iranian “modern”—developed under the leadership of Reza Shah, affecting women’s mobility as well as their confinement in Iranian cities. Building her argument on sources such as contemporary Iranian newspapers and architectural magazines, Ziaee explores the ways in which women’s lives were impacted as urban space was reconceptualised along Western-oriented, modernist planning principles. While the so-called democratization and desegregation of urban space enabled some women—notably upper-class elites—to move more freely in the cities and interact with men in public space, it constricted the lives of women from more traditional religious and lower-class backgrounds. Unable to move of their own accord in public without breaking new laws that banned the public wearing of veils, these women resorted to gathering on and traversing the cities via rooftops rather than removing their headscarves and promenading openly on the new, tree-lined boulevards. However, in doing so, they inspired the contradictions in the essay’s title, a spark of new solidarities and resistances. Ziaee draws on feminist theory to reconstitute gendered practices in her critical feminist intervention. She ultimately demands that the reader engage in the high stakes of spatial politics, and that historians commit to the difficult recuperation of obscured narratives.

8 The empirical questions that these essays pose in terms of strategies for reading archives beg parallel or counterpoint readings of theory. In recent literature, we have seen a feminist defamiliarization of architectural histories through engagement with a range of theorists. Silvia Federici’s work on witchcraft has informed understandings of capitalism. Simone de Beauvoir’s work on cities has illuminated issues of urban spatial restriction in history. The problematic of nomadism in the writings of Gilles Deleuze or Rosi Braidotti has troubled—or enabled—architectural histories of women crossing borders by force or need. The subject-solidarities proposed by Judith Butler or Donna Haraway have been architecturally figured by or within margins. However, beyond reading architecture through the work of theorists, we see the possibility of theory emerging from architectural histories of migration.

9 We aim to theorize the spaces within and around which migrations and mobilities occurred by positing them as margins. We do not see margins in the sense of Derrida’s paradoxical “supplement,” which would locate their purpose as aiding an original or replacing a lack, implying that they are not themselves whole, or that their constitution is subjugated to some other formal regime. Instead, we look to margins as figured zones and often concrete places under continuous negotiation with adjacent territories. A margin may be understood through a variety of spatial and material cognates: periphery, border, fringe, exterior, interior, buffer, surplus, edge, and so on. Whether of land or fabric, whether architectural, structural, cultural, (geo)political, environmental or economic, whether glaring or difficult to observe, margins come into view through migration. Thinking with bell hooks, we regard margins as sites of potential and resistance. Their distinct ontologies and emergent epistemologies offer
traces of historically meaningful events and architectures, and figure new views of the mundane as well as the exceptional. The synthesis of migration and margins, as concepts, has the potential to proffer a set of feminist architectural histories of migration, which would expand a global architectural historiography, opening it to new theorizations and situated historical perspectives.

On margins

10 Hochhäusl argues that Schütte-Lihotzky’s career embodied a position of marginality, particularly in the period following her incarceration as a member of the Resistance to Nazi occupation during World War II. Her feminist activism, gender, age, and most certainly her communist convictions isolated her professionally. However, as a consequence of inhabiting this margin, Schütte-Lihotzky explored different forms of knowledge production, engaging writing and social and political activism as forms of architectural practice. Marginality within one regime enabled her extensive mobility and migration within another. She travelled widely in the Eastern bloc and the larger communist world, which, in turn, shaped her shifting views on architecture and urbanism, refining her locally situated perspectives and validating an expanded architectural practice. Hers is an example of inverting a margin.

11 Gendered margins and marginalizations are central to Armaghan Ziaee’s essay. Her focus on the impacts of Reza Shah’s urban reforms on women’s lives brings both social and spatial margins to light, exploring their intersections. Key to her argument is the paradox that these reforms enacted. While the Shah’s modernisations enabled women from the economic and social elites to participate more fully in public urban life and to emerge from the margins, women with lesser economic means, whose backgrounds often encouraged more traditional forms of cultural expression, for example, in clothing, were forced deeper into confinement. Unable to afford or unwilling to wear the attire prescribed by the new laws, many women could no longer appear in public. To resist this increased marginalization, they developed new tactics and solidarities, using existing spaces in unexpected ways and creating architectural solutions, such as making openings in walls to allow access to friends and family without the need to appear on a street, installing new bathing spaces within existing courtyards to circumvent the now difficult to access public hammams, or using rooftops as nocturnal pathways. Theirs is an example of mobilizing the margin’s adjacencies.

12 In the “Sources”-section of this issue, Assia Samaï-Bouadjadja’s contribution, “Le fonds d’archives Georgette Cottin-Euziol: archive de toute une vie,” introduces an archival collection that documents the work of the French-Algerian architect Georgette Cottin-Euziol. Based on Cottin-Euziol’s and her husband Claude Garnier-Euziol’s private collections, the archive is now held by the Archives of the Bouches-du-Rhône department, in Marseille (France). One of the first women to qualify professionally as an architect in France, Cottin-Euziol worked in Algeria from 1956 to 1978. Despite designing a wide range of buildings—including clinics, housing, a town hall, a church, schools, libraries, theatres, a cinema, hotels, company headquarters—at a variety of scales, for the state and for private clients, Cottin-Euziol’s work remains understudied and largely unknown. Questioning the place of women within the historiography of post-independence Algerian architecture, Samaï-Bouadjadja underscores Cottin-Euziol’s marginalization in the press: newspaper articles about the buildings, which
Cottin-Euziol carefully cut out and kept, never mentioned her name. While this “abnegation,” as Samaï-Bouadjadja terms it, contributed to her exclusion from Algerian architectural discourse, her personally curated archive harbours potential for future scholars to critically explore her oeuvre and her role in Algerian nation building. Cottin-Euziol articulated and projected a margin, through her careful construction of a historical record.

In “The gendered user and the generic city: Simone de Beauvoir’s America Day by Day (1948/1954),” a text included in the “Reviews”-section of this issue, Mary Pepchinski disaggregates Simone de Beauvoir’s affective experiences of American cities, arguing that they constitute a source for understanding the gendered accessibility of urban space. Pepchinski makes a case for studying publications that might not be specifically collected under the rubric of “urbanism” (which was long a male-dominated field) to gain a gendered understanding of urban space. Positing that Beauvoir did not want her book to be seen as competition for recent publications on urbanism in the United States by Le Corbusier and Paul Morand, Pepchinski suggests that Beauvoir worked within a margin, developing her own strategies for exploring urban life in less explicit terms. She follows Beauvoir through movie houses and drugstore lunch counters, harbours and dockyards, churches, ballrooms, and bars in neighborhoods in white and black America. As she searches for collectivity while grappling with issues of racial and gender segregation, Beauvoir engaged embodied experiences of walking through and temporarily inhabiting different urban environments, integrating her reflections on her personal encounters with contemporary social and political questions. If Beauvoir elided questions of her own racial and social mobility, her migratory method sketched the contours of social as well as discursive margins.

Kathleen James-Chakraborty’s review of Hilde Heynen’s Sibyl Moholy-Nagy: Architecture, Modernism and its Discontents (Bloomsbury, 2019) completes the contributions to the themed section. Drawing on points made by Heynen, James-Chakraborty highlights the global approach that Moholy-Nagy applied to her writings on architectural and urban history, referring in her works to examples that spanned vernacular and formal spatial configurations. James-Chakraborty suggests this may have stemmed from Moholy-Nagy’s position as an exile, pointing to other migrants, including Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, who also integrated their fascination with local forms into their exilic practices. However, beyond the margin of exile, Moholy-Nagy’s experience of professional isolation following her husband’s death may have further sharpened her view as a stranger, opening her horizon to different possibilities. For Moholy-Nagy, the margin in which she practiced was an exceptional space.

On migration

Since 2015, there has been an upsurge in scholarly interventions that engage with migration and exile. The “crisis” perceived in Europe has impacted European traditions of architectural history, architecture culture, and discourse. Thus, the writing on architecture and the built environment resulting from this turn has tended to focus on contemporary displacement related to cities, landscapes, and social fabric in Europe. These have broadly drawn from a Eurocentric perspective of border transgression, rather than taken migration as an ontological condition, to be understood from the migrant’s perspective.
In contrast, the essays in this themed section and related contributions in this issue of *Architecture Beyond Europe* examine a longer time frame and wider geographical scope in order to consider architecture and migration historically. While most recent spatial studies of migration and exile are rooted in the social sciences, the essays here suggest a humanities approach that can open up wider historical debates to encompass the territorial, economic, and geopolitical aspects of migration as well as those of material culture, ecologies, and labour. Using migration as an analytical lens upon the constructed environment offers possibilities to restore absences and silences in the historical record, as the articles here demonstrate.

Methodologically, the essays here follow questions initiated by *Architecture Beyond Europe* in multiple ways. First, they recuperate histories that center European people, or initiatives understood in relation to, if outside of, Europe. These focus on architectural careers and works emerging during periods of transnational migration in the twentieth-century capitalist and communist worlds, which lie partly or entirely outside the boundaries of colonial or postcolonial Europe. Second, they follow architectural protagonists and referents that offer unambiguous figures and figurations, providing historical precision on recognized narratives.

However, the essays collected in this themed section are also part of a broader experiment. “Feminist Architectural Histories of Migration” is a multi-sited, ongoing project, which includes essays published in sister collections in other journals. We aim to test the practice of writing feminist architectural histories of migration through the exercise of developing parallel collections in distinctly different editorial contexts. Essays in each collection differently experiment with historiographical agency, the relation of text and image, the valence and potency of the architectural referent, embodied and queer histories, and other strategies that draw out a feminist understanding of a margin and think with migration as a method. Together, these collections attempt to establish polyphonic narratives. We invite the reader to think with this constellation of articles and collections while reading each text in this themed section and elsewhere in this issue of *Architecture Beyond Europe*. We hope that this exercise will produce an insistent question of how immersion in these many approaches figures a margin, and, indeed, how that margin speaks.

NOTES

1. While there is a broad literature to cite, the following interventions represent collaborative historiographic practices whose articulated aims in the relationship between theory, historiography, and practice have informed the “Feminist Architectural Histories of Migration” project. Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden (eds.), *Gender Space Architecture: an interdisciplinary introduction*, London: Routledge, 2000 (The Architext series); Hilde Heynen and Gülsüm Baydar (eds.), *Negotiating Domesticity: spatial productions of gender in modern architecture*, London: Routledge, 2005; Hélène Frichot, Catharina Gabrielsson and Helen Runting (eds.),
2. For example, such figures might include (and are not limited to): Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, Elsa Gidoni Mandelstamm, Sybil (Sybille) Moholy-Nagy (Pietzch), Charlotte Perriand, Martta Martikainen-Ypyä, Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, Dorothy Hughes, Jane Drew, Georgia Louise Harris Brown, Perin Mistri, Lina Bo Bardi, Erica (Erika) Mann (Schoenbaum), Minnette De Silva, Gillian Hopwood, Denise Scott Brown, Hannah Schreckenbach, Flora Ruchat-Roncati, and Diana Lee-Smith.


7. Our collaboration began in 2014. In addition to the texts presented here, collections under the rubric of “Feminist Architectural Histories of Migration” are forthcoming in the online platforms of Aggregate (currently in manuscript development and editing) and Canadian Centre for Architecture (currently in conceptual development). Publications and papers related to this project include: Anooradha Iyer SIDDIGI, “Writing With:

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