

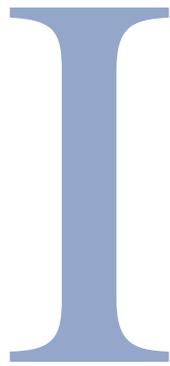
# an interview with susana torre

Susana

Torre has built a practice based upon an intense theoretical, ethical, and civic sense of architecture and urban design. Her work, covering a range of scales, reveals the high value she places on continuous learning and engagement in mindful, ethical and moral discourse regarding design.<sup>1</sup> She has taught and directed architecture programs,<sup>2</sup> and engaged in creative research.<sup>3</sup> She is an author, lecturer, and active practitioner who extends her work into civic and community action.<sup>4</sup> Born in 1944 in Puan, Argentina, she has lived in the United States since 1968. Ms Torre was one of the founding members of the International Archive of Women in Architecture, located at Virginia Tech, and served on its board from 1985 – 1995. She was recently elected Emerita Advisor of the IAWA.



interview by marcia feuerstein



**In 1998, you wrote:**

“ . . . As an architect and urban designer, I am fascinated by cities, towns, and villages, because they represent human aspirations and attitudes about life and the natural environment. We now live in a world where even nature is thoroughly constructed by human intervention and thus as much part of culture as are cities. What makes one place distinct from any other is a complex accumulation of features, social and historical as well as physical. In our region, the trend since the mid-20th Century has been the preservation of pickled vignettes of the past within increasingly generic environments. For as long as its organizers continue making the village available for reinterpretation by locals and outsiders alike, “Footfalls” will represent one effort to resist the trend towards the homogenization of localities. In dialogue with the beautiful old buildings, which reinforce our sense of a place’s permanence and continuity, the artworks in “Footfalls” speak of renewal and change, and reassert one of art’s most enduring functions, that of making us see the world anew.<sup>5</sup>”

***I found this quite poetic - an apt description of the range, both broad and deep, of your practice as an architect and urban designer.***

Architecture is my profession but also it is my passion. For me it has encompassed a series of practices at different scales involving building design, master planning, exhibition design, teaching, lecturing and writing. The framework has been a life-long interest in the tension that exists between the ‘completeness’ of objects and the ‘incompleteness’ of design as a process. I’m also interested in the tension that exists between the past and the future. What propels us towards the future is the past. The future, in turn, refers us back to earlier moments in history. It is a back and forth activity, not a linear one.

why architecture?

***Would you talk about your practice and life in architecture?<sup>6</sup> We could begin with your personal history. Why architecture?***

I did not have an early interest in architecture. There are no architects in my family, my father was an economist. I became aware of architecture as a profession in secondary school. My best friend was interested in architecture but I was headed towards sociology, psychiatry and psychology. In the end she became the psychologist and I became the architect! But I was interested in the physical nature of environments since early age, and after secondary school decided to simultaneously pursue degrees in architecture and in psychology. After a year it became clear that architecture was more interesting to me because it was more challenging.

***Where did you live as a child?***

We lived in Puan, a very small town where, as children, we could go anywhere. Everybody knew who we were and looked after us.

***You felt safe to wander.***

Absolutely. ... We never had the sense of a boundary. We would walk as far as our legs would take us. My cousin and I had a favorite game when we were five or six years old. We made nests for birds; pretending that they would actually prefer the nests we made to their own. We tried to mimic the ones we had seen, but actually believed that we could improve them — what did we know then!

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*Ironworkers Union Headquarters and Office Building, New York City. A seven-story addition to an existing three-story building and new façade, 1990 (in association with WASA.)*

***When you moved to the USA, you left Argentina's distinct culture and political situation and arrived in New York City ...***

I came to the United States in 1968 with a degree in architecture and a scholarship to study urban design and planning at Columbia University.

***Did you remain at Columbia?***

Yes, this was at the beginning of what became known as the "dirty war" [in Argentina] when the military were making a lot of people disappear, including many of my classmates. My friends and professors urged me to stay, in spite of the fact that I had started the first museum department of Architecture and Design in Argentina, after my first visit to the US in 1967, on a Kaufman Foundation study travel fellowship which allowed me to visit several major cities and architectural sites in the US, Canada and Latin America. Here I very quickly received some exceptional opportunities, including a Noble Foundation fellowship to train in curatorship at the department of architecture of the Museum of Modern Art, and a contract to frame the research and write the final report on New Urban Settlements for the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies. By the time democracy was restored in Argentina in 1983, New York City had become my home because my friends, work, and professional opportunities were here. Now I have lived more than half of my life in the United States.

***Did these two disparate places, cultures, and languages change the way you viewed architecture, practice, and the role of architects in the world?***

I am completely bilingual and bicultural, which is probably going the norm for most people in this century.

***In what way?***

Globalization has fostered massive displacements of professionals, laborers, and refugees throughout the world. When I taught at the University of Sydney, Australia, I had many students who were tri-lingual and tri-cultural: ethnic Chinese who moved to Indonesia and then eventually to Australia. I was amazed how well they were able to inhabit all three identities.

***Do you see globalization as integrating, homogenizing, creating a new (third) identity?***

You end up creating a dialogue between the two. There is no single fixed identity for people who inhabit large cities. People had fixed identities in the small town where I grew up, and any deviation from assigned social roles was actively discouraged.

***Is this what you experienced when left your home and remained in New York City?***

When I came to New York City as a young woman, I felt that, unlike a town where traditions ruled, the city provided freedom to experiment. In general women acquired their freedom to think and act as modern subjects in cities, in urban environments – never in small towns, suburbs or the countryside.

***What were your first experiences with architecture?***

In 1969 I finished an ambitious project in La Plata, capital of the Province of Buenos Aires, where I had been studying architecture. A close friend was the son of an important real estate developer and he hired me to design his first development project, a six-story apartment building. We were both in our early 20s. The building contractor tried many times to subvert our work to

demonstrate how young and inexperienced we were. I was so intent on demonstrating my knowledge that I even calculated the structure! Of course we had to check it with the civil engineer. For a young person, it was a very grand and ambitious project. Before that, while I was a second or third year architecture student, I built a small weekend house for myself and my first husband, a painter. I built much of it with my own hands. I was reaching beyond my knowledge, which is as it should be.

***Was the design of the La Plata apartments unusual?***

Actually, yes. I introduced flexibility and choice where there would have been none. These small one-bedroom apartments were designed for people whose children no longer lived with them. I treated the space as a loft (we didn't even have that word or building type in Argentina) with the bathroom and kitchen to one side. This left the apartment open so the room had two exposures, and designed large wardrobe-like furniture on wheels that could be put up against a wall or used as a divider. Years later I found out that I had reinvented a wheel already invented by Catherine Beecher in her 1869 theoretical prototype for an "American Woman's Home."

***What did you do when you began practicing in the United States?***

I had a typical New York City young architect's practice, dealing mostly with interiors and renovations. I wanted to try my hand at whole little buildings, even whole bigger buildings. I was lucky that one of my projects was widely published when my exhibition "Women in American Architecture" (1977) opened. Many male colleagues and former professors had warned me that the exhibition would 'brand' me: I would no longer be seen as a real designer.

***You were warned that if you were identified as a "woman architect" the "woman" would obscure your work as a serious "architect"?***

Yes. In the late 70s such an exhibition was disturbing to many people. Those who wished me well thought that all my aspirations as an architectural designer and practitioner would be diminished because of my association with this project. Coincidentally, my design for a law office was on the cover of *Interiors* magazine and it was also published by *Progressive Architecture*, *Domus* and *Architecture Créé* in France. The project had a strong theoretical framework and was also chosen as one of the most memorable spaces of the 1970s by the AIA. Although my career has not been exclusively associated with women's issues and feminism, feminist issues have always been integrated with my designs.

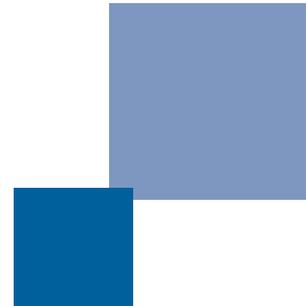
***Say more about your practice... you have been a principal and partner in large and small offices. ...***

During the 1980s I moved gradually from interiors to houses and small public buildings and additions. In 1985 I associated my firm with a much larger one, going from a five-person office to becoming one of seven partners in a 150-person office. I wanted to have the experience of that kind of practice but suspected that the experience was not one that I wanted for more than a few years.

Old offices with multiple partners rarely offer the kind of cooperative structure that is required for design excellence. Also, the economic downturn that left the profession decimated in 1989 made it clear that, in order to preserve profits, there would be pressure to lower design quality. That was something I was not willing to do. I left and re-established my small office.

***Yes, I experienced that in the early 80s. But I was on the 'other side' - attempting to fulfill the requirements of my architectural apprenticeship in the midst of a***

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*climate of pending layoffs. Did your sense of practice and your role within practice change during this economic downturn?*

This period impacted my practice adversely, just as it did that of many architects. During the 1990s I focused on education, developing master plans, writing and designing exhibitions.

*Thinking back on your work, what projects stand out?*

Those where I was able to create new paradigms. One, the “House of Meanings,”(1971) was an open-ended, “unresolved” space matrix of parallel walls for the creation of human dwellings. This allowed the development of interconnected patterns of privacy and community, and of built and landscaped spaces.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the Wall has been inscribed in Western literature as a representation of the Mother — both good and bad, so the open matrix was a way of providing enclosure and protection without the rigid distinctions that used to be made between public/private, outside/inside. Another project was the law offices I mentioned earlier, where I utilized a “site matrix” showing that no site can ever be neutral, empty or void. I developed and used the concept of site mapping in other projects and in teaching.

*Could you say more about your concept of mapping a site?*

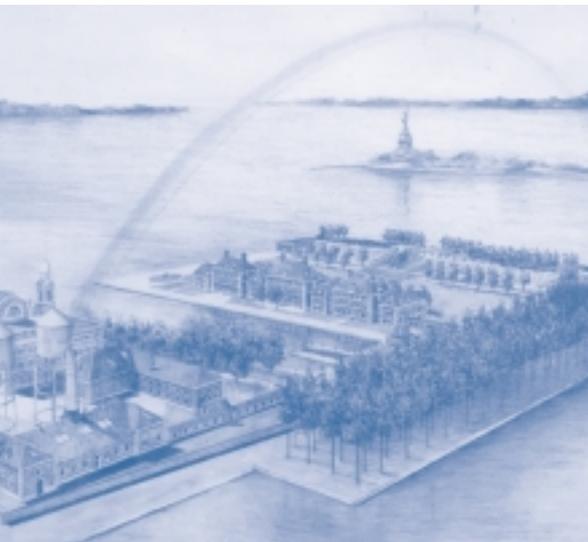
It was a precursor idea to GIS mapping, before computers allowed the instant cross-referencing of visual data. In the 70s architects considered sites as voids to be filled by buildings. But there is no void in nature. Even then we had enough knowledge of the evolutions of landscapes to be able to map a site, describing a more complex context, creating a site matrix, for future interventions.<sup>8</sup>

*Your master plan for the restoration of Ellis Island developed from this framework of a pre-existing site-based spatial matrix.*

The project was meant to be a collaboration with an artist, for an exhibition sponsored by the Architecture League of New York. He was a sculptor whose conception of space was the air that surrounded an object. Trained as an architect, I looked at space in the opposite way, as something that can be shaped and molded. We developed the project’s conceptual approach together and then parted ways. I continued the project developing a site matrix that recorded overlapping histories of Ellis Island, an artificial island that was this country’s most important immigration portal. In my proposal, Ellis Island was constituted by two halves, one devoted to the past, the other to the re-enactment of traditions influencing the present and future of this society. On the past-related half containing the great hall for the processing of immigrants, I imprinted the overlapping outlines of the island as it grew and changed. Peter Eisenman, who was not invited to participate in that exhibition and was very angry about that, later developed a similar methodology of overlapping archaeologies for his designs. This is also something that happens to women: male colleagues mine our work without acknowledging us as sources, yet they take extreme pains to acknowledge their debt to a male colleague.

*This type of appropriation is experienced by other women professors and professionals. Your design for Fire Station Five, in Columbus, Indiana addressed some of these tendencies.*

Fire Station Five was designed against an existing building “type.” The city of Columbus wanted to recruit women firefighters and prevent them from quitting shortly thereafter, as it was happening everywhere. In studying fire stations I realized the very building type, including its spatial organization, would have to be redesigned to prevent women from feeling they were appendages, tolerated as honorary males. I redesigned the building type by replacing the traditional dormitory with individual bedrooms and restructuring the social



Top and bottom: Ellis Island Park and Museum Master Plan Proposal, New York City Harbor, 1981.

space — the kitchen and dining area — so that women would not be stuck with traditional domestic roles in the firehouse. Social spaces were structured to facilitate collaboration. I also imbued with theatrical overtones two spaces where the fitness and ability of firefighters could be on display. I wanted the men to see the women's strength and abilities in these spaces — the exercise room and the fire pole—and to confirm that they were fit to save their lives if this was required.

I was able to develop further this interest in the body's relation to architecture in a recent closed competition project for a museum of women's history in Battery Park City, New York. The human body has always been acknowledged as the element that defines human scale in architecture, albeit if it has been the male body inscribed within circles and squares, or in the guise of Modulor. But there has never been a space created by the body, rather than for it. In this project I used topology-based software to design spaces generated by the movements of a dancer. I am very excited by the possibilities of the methodology, and by the experimentation that will result from it, especially when one considers that body language is culturally based. I am now trying to establish a collaboration with a choreographer to pursue these experiments in architectural form.

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education & the design disciplines

***The 'landmarks' among your designs have a critical social component. While you operate within the distinct bounds of the design professions (architecture and urban design and planning), you also develop proposals that examine social conditions. One of these, an alternate plan for the urban renewal of Cooper Square, preserves two buildings, which are historical sites of women's history in the Lower East Side of NYC. What led you to this approach to practice?***

For me architecture is series of practices. It is an art form, and the embodiment of social processes. Architects should do pro-bono projects; mine have included a nursery school in Harlem and consulting on housing and master planning for community and women's organizations. It is very important to teach students to see themselves as contributors to the quality of life in their communities — as do many businesses — by providing services to organizations that may need them but can't afford them. In this way, we expand the horizon of opportunities for all of us.

***The promotion of service in practice is also tied to a notion that education spans throughout one's practice and lifetime. What are your thoughts about education in architecture and the educational 'world' of architecture?***

Architecture is one of the disciplines engaged in the design of living environments, but it's not the only one — or even the best one — to consider their totality. Other disciplines are required to consider design issues at different scales: landscape, urban and interior design. Integrated designs require successful collaborations. However, each discipline has evolved its own methodologies, specialized knowledge, and world of references, making it very difficult to find a common language. It is possible for architects to do post-graduate work in urban or interior design, but it would be better to develop an interdisciplinary framework at the beginning rather than the end of one's specialized education.

This is what I set out to do with the new undergraduate, non-professional curriculum I established with faculty support when I became Director of the Department of Architecture and Environmental Design at Parsons. Rather than accepting an incoming student's stated wish to become an architect (usually because someone in the family already was one), we tried to give each student

a wide exposure in the design cultures of urban design and planning, landscape architecture, building and furniture design during three semesters beginning in the sophomore year. Many discovered that their talents were in the detail-focused scales of building and interior design, while others fell in love with the overview or participatory processes of planning and urban design. We could counsel them so that, in graduate education, they would follow their talents instead of their original prejudices. We also wanted to create professionals attuned to the totality of living environments no matter at what scale they worked.

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***It is difficult for students to see where their talent might lie. How else did they find out about 'practices' in design?***

We instituted an introductory course of histories and methodologies of the different disciplines. Sophomores visited offices of different kinds of practitioners. Undergraduates joined graduate M.Arch. students in charrettes at the beginning of each school year, dealing with proposals for sites in the city. Union Square, next to our building, was a yearly laboratory for the construction and public display of structures built by teams. We accepted commissions from civic organizations that enabled students to design and build their projects. We developed partnerships with professional firms to work on housing for community developers in our neighborhood, with schematic designs initiated in studios jointly taught by faculty and practitioners to be later developed in the firms with the students' participation.

***So the responsibility of educators is to engage not only students but also the profession. Do you see how to instill the understanding that professional education is not merely a means toward an end (a way to arrive at a profession, a job, an income), but an ongoing way of life?***

I hope you see this in my own work. Education should be a life-long endeavor. But it is fundamental to retain an interest in being challenged, and the ability to reject the comfort of entertainment masquerading as education.

***What do you mean by this?***

I question the validity of many programs that claim to fulfill AIA continuing education requirements. And many architects prefer being entertained by limited information presented in an amusing way to understanding how our cultural frame of reference changes all the time. This takes real effort. Most books we read during our college education define a frame of reference that eventually becomes history.

***Learning takes time, but curiosity and openness are necessary...***

Absolutely. You have to be willing to change your mind or be open to ideas that may change your mind.

***Did you find that your attitudes for the interdisciplinary approach in education were being challenged?***

Oh yes. Some admissions officers at Parsons preferred the narrow approach, which they saw as more marketable, probably because it played on existing attitudes. They would say "why expand their views when students say they want to be architects. Why challenge that?" Now we find that this approach has been adopted by a number of programs nation wide.

***You've talked about a number of projects that engaged you as a feminist and as an activist in architecture.***



Amagansett House, Long Island NY, 1988

architecture & feminism

I've been a feminist both as an activist and a scholar. I am interested in changing and improving the social, economic and cultural status of women but also in the structures that define a society's frame of reference, preventing and delaying change. During the 1970s feminists, including me, were interested in breaking down boundaries of all sorts: private/public, inside/outside, masculine/feminine. We were also interested in recovering lost histories (herstories). Success in these areas led to further investigations, during the mid-80s and 90s, into gender perspectives of all forms of knowledge. The result has been a broader and deeper understanding of women's historical invisibility and the conditions for inscribing their cultural contributions.

***These reflective structures of thinking feed directly into design and practice. Your fire station is relevant ...***

Yes, the design of Fire Station Five, my own dwelling, and other domestic and public projects reflect my concerns with the refashioning of domesticity and public life in the past two decades. Fire Station Five, in particular, was designed to include women firefighters in the formerly exclusive male environment of the fire station. This was done by changing the spatial organization of fire stations from being dormitory-based to being bedroom-based, so that bonding would not happen in the context of bodily proximity, but in the context of mediated social interaction. I thought it important to have a semi-enclosed space that would not be visually scrutinized by taxpayers, and designed the living quarters in two wings for that purpose. An architectural theorist interpreted this feature as a prescription for a gender perspective on design, with separate male and female wings.<sup>9</sup>

***Is that how the building has evolved?***

This certainly was not the way I had envisioned the design. The wings were meant to separate the more from the less public functions at the ground floor, while allowing the enclosure of an open space away from public view. This ground floor separation supported a gender separation above, suggesting the creation of separate male and female wings, which were not needed in my fire station because of the privacy afforded by separate bedrooms. In spite of the typological distortions, my proposal has been adopted throughout the country.

## participation in the IAWA

***You were a founding advisor on the Board of Advisors of the International Archive of Women in Architecture (IAWA) and remained on the Board for its first 10 years. How did you become involved in the IAWA?***

I had become aware of Milka Bliznakov through her research on women designers in the Soviet Union, which was very important pioneering work. Since the mid-70s very few scholars were working on art history from a feminist perspective. There were even fewer in architecture, because the professional and academic environments were hostile to these views. Milka was one of the few who persevered regardless of the consequences to their careers. She asked me to join the Board of Advisors and I offered to help in any way I could to develop the IAWA as a unique documentation center.

***Even after retiring from the Board, you continue to contribute your work to the collection.***

The collection I have given the Archive includes project documents of my work during the 15 years between the opening of the exhibition "Women in American Architecture" and my becoming the Director of the Architecture and Environmental design department of Parsons School of Design in New York City. This period documents the growth and changes of a beginning architect trying

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Fire Station Five, Columbus IN, 1987 (in association with WASA). View of the exercise room.

to make her mark in culture. I believe these documents would be useful to students, faculty, and researchers regardless of issues of gender. I will eventually add the original drawings that pertain to those projects.

***How should the archive evolve? Should it restrict itself to the work of pioneering women? Perhaps it should collect the work of alumnae ...***

The focus on original work of the pioneers is important; otherwise that work will be lost. Contemporary work can be accessed through the Internet. An emphasis on the original drawing material and files is important regardless of whether they are by pioneers or not. Computer-generated drawings can be endlessly duplicated, so it's important to archive originals. There should be a drive to obtain original documentation of at least one project of an architect's work, even one drawing. The IAWA's website should also be the first place to find updated links to the work of women architects currently practicing throughout the world.

***These original documents of international practice in architecture are a treasure. The IAWA contains historical, original work that fits neatly into research, teaching, and practice agendas of the University and could be accessed like similar collections – the Architectural Archive at the University of Pennsylvania's GSFA.***

I always thought that the materials would be also useful for teaching professional practice, or analysis and representation. But the IAWA's primary role should remain to be the international repository of work by women architects who worked before women started to get professional, if not cultural recognition. Without the IAWA, the memory of women's contributions to architecture would be irretrievably lost.



*The Museum of Women, New York City, 2000. Invited competition. View of the media gallery.*

<sup>1</sup> The range of Susana Torre's work is illustrated by the following projects: 1) Exhibition and Graphic Design: "Women in Architecture," which opened at the Brooklyn Museum in 1977 and then toured the United States and The Netherlands, and cover design for Lucy Lippard's *From the Center: Essays on Art and Feminism*; 2) Interiors: Editor's and Graphic Designer's lounges, Old Pension Building, Wash. D.C. (1979) and Consulate for the Ivory Coast in New York City (1980); 3) Private Residences: a turn-of-the-century carriage house in Southampton, New York, which received a 1982 Award of Excellence of Design from *Architectural Record* and the Amagansett House (1988), in the IAWA Collection; 4) Public Buildings: Fire Station Five of Columbus, Indiana, (1987) and The Wallach Fine Arts Center at Schermerhorn Hall, Columbia University (1985); 5) Master Planning: Master plans for Ellis Island in New York Harbor (1981) and The Brooklyn Children's Museum (2000)

<sup>2</sup> Director of the Barnard College Architecture Program, Chair of the Parsons School of Design Architecture and Environmental Design Program and Director of the Cranbrook Academy of Art. Torre has taught at numerous universities here and abroad, including Columbia, Yale, Carnegie-Mellon, Université de Montréal (Canada), University of Sydney (Australia), University of Kassel (Germany) and University of Buenos Aires (Argentina)

<sup>3</sup> Editor and Author, *Women in American Architecture: a Historic and Contemporary Perspective*, New York: Whitney Library of Design 1977; curator of *Hispanic Traditions in American Architecture*, a Columbia University traveling exhibition, 1986; author of *Latin American Architecture and Urbanism: A Critical History*, New York: W.W.Norton forthcoming in 2004; author of numerous essays, including "Claiming the Public Space: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo," in Agrest, Diana et al., eds. *The Sex of Architecture*. New York: Abrams 1996

<sup>4</sup> Some of Ms. Torre's work in this area includes: Housing for Community Access, a non-profit developer in Manhattan's Lower East side, designed with her students at Parsons school of Design in 1994; heading an alternative to the Cooper Square Urban Renewal (CSUR) Plan, also in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, including the preservation of buildings at 295 Bowery and 293-291 Bowery that were significant in women's history; and the exhibition narrative for "Reclaiming the Hudson River Waterfront", an exhibition for a Hoboken NJ-based community organization (with her landscape architecture partner Cassandra Wilday.)

<sup>5</sup> Susana Torre, "Mapping the Walk," in the catalog for *Footfalls*, a yearly exhibition of site-specific art works in Greenport NY, 1998

<sup>6</sup> These categories were derived from a series of questions developed by Marcia Feuerstein and Dawn Bushnaq, a graduate student in architecture. Ms Torre received these in preparation for the interview, which was conducted over the phone on 23 February 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Susana Torre, "Space As Matrix," *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Issue 11, 1981, and Karen A. Franck, "A Feminist Approach to Architecture," in Ellen Perry Berkeley, ed. *Architecture, A Place for Women*, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institute Press 1989

<sup>8</sup> This is explained in an essay in David Morton, "For More Complexity", *Progressive Architecture*, May 1977

<sup>9</sup> Sherry Ahrenzen, "The F Word in Architecture: Feminist Analysis in/of/for Architecture," in Thomas Dutton and Lian Hurst Mann, eds. *Reconstructing Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices*, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996