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Gender Space Architecture

An interdisciplinary introduction



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'Claiming the Public Space: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo'

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To my 'disappeared' Argentinian classmates, and to their mothers

The role of women in the transformation of cities remains theoretically problematic. While women's leadership in organizations rebuilding communities and neighborhoods and their creation of new paradigms for monumentality are sometimes noted in the press, these interventions have yet to inform cultural discourse in the design disciplines or in the history and theory of art and architecture.

The largest body of current feminist scholarship on women in urban settings is concerned with the construction of bourgeois femininity in nineteenth-century European capitals.¹ Within this framework, women are seen as extensions of the male gaze and as instruments of the emerging consumer society and its transformative powers at the dawn of modernity. In other words, they are described as passive agents rather than engaged subjects.² When women have assumed transformative roles, feminist critics and biographers have seen them as exceptional individuals or female bohemians, publicly flaunting class and gender distinctions; in contrast, women in general, and working-class women in particular, are presented as unintentional agents of a collective social project, acting out assigned scripts. As a class, women share the problematic status of politically or culturally colonized populations. Both are seen as passively transformed by forced modernization rather than as appropriating modernity on their own and, through this appropriation, being able to change the world that is transforming them.

From this perspective it is difficult to see the current individual and collective struggle of women to transform urban environments as anything of cultural significance, or to re-evaluate the enduring influence of traditional female enclaves originated in the premodern city. Many of these enclaves continue to serve their traditional functional and social roles, like the public washing basins in major Indian cities or the markets in African villages, while others have persisted as symbolic urban markings, like the forest of decorated steel poles that once held clotheslines in Glasgow's most central park. Some of these enclaves have even become a city's most important open space, like River Walk in San Antonio, Texas, where women once congregated to wash laundry and socialize.

A literature is now emerging, focused on the participation by marginalized populations in the transformation of postmodern cities and establishing the critical connection between power and spatiality, particularly within the disciplines of art and architectural history and architectural and urban design.³ To these contributions, which have revealed previously unmarked urban sites as well as the social consequences of repressive urban planning ideologies, should be added feminist analyses of women's traditional urban enclaves and of women's appropriations of public sites that symbolized their exclusion or restricted status. These appropriations, whether in the form of one of the largest mass demonstrations ever held on the Washington Mall (in favor of abortion rights) or in the display of intimacy in very public settings (such as the private offerings and mementos that complete Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial and compose the monumental Names Quilt commemorating Aids victims), continue to establish women's rights not merely to inhabit but also to transform the public realm of the city. It is in such situations that women have been most effective in constructing themselves as transformative subjects, altering society's perception of public space and inscribing their own stories into the urban palimpsest.⁴

As in all instances where the topic of discussion is as complex as the transformative presence of women in the city – and particularly when this topic does not yet operate within an established theoretical framework – the main difficulty is to establish a point of entry. In the present essay I propose entering this territory through the examination of one dramatic case of a successful, enduring appropriation: the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina.⁵ This small but persistent group of women protested for years in the nation's principal 'space of public appearance,' as Hanna Arendt has called the symbolic realm of social representation, which is controlled by the dominant political or economic structures of society. This case illustrates the process that leads from the embodiment of traditional roles and assigned scripts as wives and mothers to the emergence of the active, transformative subject, in spite of – or perhaps because of – the threat or actuality of physical violence that acts of protest attract in autocratic societies. As we will see, this case is also emblematic of architecture's complicity with power in creating a symbolic system of representation, usually of power hierarchies. The hegemony of this system has been threatened ever since the invention of the printing press and is now claimed by electronic media and its virtual space of communication. Finally, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo's appropriation of the public square as a stage for the enactment of their plea is a manifestation of *public space* as social production. Their redefinition of that space suggests that the public realm neither resides in nor can be represented by buildings and spaces but rather is summoned into existence by social actions.

THE MOTHERS OF THE PLAZA DE MAYO

In March 1976, after a chaotic period following Juan Perón's death, a military junta wrested power from Perón's widow, Isabel, in order (as the junta claimed) to restore order and peace to the country. The first measures toward achieving this goal were

similar to those of General Pinochet in Chile three years earlier, and included the suspension of all civil rights, the dissolution of all political parties, and the placement of labor unions and universities under government control. It would take seven long, dark years for a democratically elected government to be restored to Argentina, which at last permitted an evaluation of the extent of open kidnappings, torture, and executions of civilians tolerated by the military. Because of the clandestine, unrecorded activities of the para-military groups charged with these deeds, and because many burial sites still remain undisclosed, agreement as to the exact number of 'disappeared' may never be achieved, but estimates range from 9,000 to 30,000. Inquiries to the police about the fate of detainees went unanswered. Luis Puenzo's 1985 film, *The Official Story*, offers glimpses into the torture and degradation endured by thousands of men, women, and even babies, born in detention, some of whom were adopted by the torturers' families.

'Disappearances' were very effective in creating complicitous fear: many kidnappings were conducted in broad daylight, and the victims had not necessarily demonstrated open defiance of the military. In fact, later statistics show that almost half of the kidnappings involved witnesses, including children, relatives, and friends of those suspected of subversion. Given the effectiveness of arbitrary terror in imposing silence, it is astonishing that the public demands of less than a score of bereaved women who wanted to know what had happened to their children contributed so much to the military's fall from power. Their silent protest, opposed to the silence of the authorities, eventually had international resonance, prompting a harsh denunciation of the Argentinean military, which led, finally, to the demise of state terrorism and the election of a democratic government.

The actions of the 'Mothers,' as they came to be known, exemplified a kind of spatial and urban appropriation that originates in private acts that acquire public significance, thus questioning the boundaries of these two commonly opposed concepts. Gender issues, too, were not unimportant. The Mothers' appropriation of the plaza was nothing like a heroic final assault on a citadel. Instead, it succeeded because of its endurance over a protracted period, which could only happen because the Mothers were conspicuously ignored by the police, the public, and the national press. As older women they were no longer sexually desirable, and as working-class women they were of an inferior ilk. Nevertheless, their motherhood status demanded conventional respect. Communicating neither attraction nor threat, they were characterized by the government as 'madwomen.' The result of their public tenacity, which started with the body exposed to violence, eventually evolved into a powerful architecture of political resistance.

Plaza de Mayo is Argentina's symbolic equivalent of the Washington Mall. It is, however, a much smaller and very different kind of space: an urban square that evolved from the Spanish Plaza de Armas, a space that has stood for national unity since Creoles gathered there to demand independence from Spain in May of 1810. The national and international visibility of Plaza de Mayo as *the* space of public appearance for Argentineans is unchallenged. Originally, as mandated by the planning ordinances of the Law of the Indies, its sides were occupied by the

colonial Cabildo, or city council, and the Catholic Cathedral. Today the most distinctive structure is the pink, neoclassical Casa Rosada, the seat of government.

Military exercises, executions, and public market commingled in the plaza until 1884, when Torcuato de Alvear, the aristocratic mayor, embarked on a Haussmanian remodeling of the center of Buenos Aires shortly after important civic structures – such as Congress and the Ministries of Finance and Social Welfare – had been completed. A major element of Alvear's plan was Avenida de Mayo, an east–west axis that put Congress and the Casa Rosada in full view of each other. Such a potent urban representation of the checks and balances of the modern, democratic state was achieved through selective demolition, including the removal of the plaza's market stalls and the shortening of the historic Cabildo's wings by half their original length. Currently, the plaza's immediate area includes several government offices, the financial district, and the city's most famous commercial street, Florida. This densely populated pedestrian thoroughfare links Avenida de Mayo to Plaza San Martín, another major urban square. A plastered masonry obelisk, the May Pyramid, erected on the square in 1811 to mark the first anniversary of the popular uprising for independence, was rebuilt as a taller, more ornate structure and placed on the axis between Congress and the Casa Rosada. In this new position, it became a metaphorical fulcrum in the balance of powers.

The now well-known image of a ring of women with heads clad in white kerchiefs circling the May Pyramid evolved from earlier spontaneous attempts at communication with government officials. At first, thirteen wives and mothers of the 'disappeared' met one another at the Ministry of the Interior, having exhausted all sources of information about their missing children and husbands. There a small office had been opened to 'process' cases brought by those who had filed writs of *habeas corpus*. One woman well in her sixties, Azucena Villaflor de Vicente, rallied the others: 'It is not here that we ought to be,' she said. 'It's the Plaza de Mayo. And when there are enough of us, we'll go to the Casa Rosada and see the president about our children who are missing.'⁶ At the time, popular demonstrations at the plaza, frequently convened by the unions as a show of support during Juan Perón's tenure, were strictly forbidden, and gatherings of more than two people were promptly dispersed by the ever-present security forces. The original group of thirteen women came to the plaza wearing white kerchiefs initially to identify themselves to one another. They agreed to return every Thursday at the end of the business day in order to call their presence to the attention of similarly aggrieved women. The Mothers moved about in pairs, switching companions so that they could exchange information while still observing the rule against demonstrations. Eventually they attracted the interest of the international press and human rights organizations, one of which provided an office where the women could congregate privately. Despite this incentive to abandon the plaza for a safer location, the Mothers sustained a symbolic presence in the form of a silent march encircling the May Pyramid. That form, so loaded with cultural and sexual associations, became the symbolic focus of what started as a literal response to the police's demand that the women 'circulate.'

The white kerchiefs were the first elements of a common architecture evolved from the body. They were adopted from the cloth diapers a few of the Mothers had worn on their heads in a pilgrimage to the Virgin of Luján's sanctuary. The diapers were those of their own missing children, whose names were embroidered on them, and formed a headgear that differentiated the Mothers from the multitude of other women in kerchiefs on that religious march. In later demonstrations the Mothers constructed full-size cardboard silhouettes representing their missing children and husbands, and shielded their bodies with the ghostly blanks of the 'disappeared.'

By 1982, the military had proven itself unable to govern the country or control runaway inflation of more than 1000 percent per year. The provision of basic services was frequently disrupted by the still powerful Peronista labor unions, and many local industries had gone bankrupt due to the comparative cheapness of imported goods under an economic policy that eliminated most import taxes. Then, in the same year, the military government embarked on an ultimately ruinous war with Great Britain over the sovereignty of the Falkland/Malvinas Islands. With the help of the United States satellite intelligence and far superior naval might, Great Britain won with few casualties, while Argentina lost thousands of ill-equipped and ill-trained soldiers. The military government, which had broadcast a fake victory on television using old movie reels rather than current film footage, was forced to step down in shame by the popular outcry that followed. Following the collapse of the military government, the Mothers were a prominent presence at the festivities in Plaza de Mayo, their kerchiefs joyously joined as bunting to create a city-sized tent over the celebrants. They have continued their circular march to this day, as a kind of living memorial and to promote their demands for full accountability and punishment for those responsible for the disappearance of their husbands and children.

After the election of a democratic government, the military leadership was prosecuted in a civil rather than military court, resulting in jail sentences for a few generals and amnesty for other military personnel. Although the amnesty was forcefully contested by the Mothers and other organizations, the protest was seen by many as divisive. Nevertheless, the Mothers and a related organization of grandmothers pressed on with attempts to find records about disappearances and fought in the courts to recover their children and grandchildren. Then, early in 1995, more than a decade after the restoration of democratic government, a retired lieutenant publicly confessed to having dumped scores of drugged but still living people from a helicopter into the open ocean, and he invited other military men on similar assignments to come forth. The Mothers were present to demonstrate this time as well, but now the bunting had become a gigantic sheet that was waved overhead as an angry, agitated sea.

The Mothers were able to sustain control of an important urban space much as actors, dancers, or magicians control the stage by their ability to establish a presence that both opposes and activates the void represented by the audience. To paraphrase Henri Lefebvre, bodies produce space by introducing direction,

rotation, orientation, occupation, and by organizing a *topos* through gestures, traces, and marks.⁷ The formal structure of these actions, their ability to refunctionalize existing urban spaces, and the visual power of the supporting props contribute to the creation of public space.

What is missing from the current debate about the demise of public space is an awareness of the loss of architecture's power to represent the *public*, as a living, acting, and self-determining community. Instead, the debate focuses almost exclusively on the *physical space* of public appearance, without regard for the social action that can make the environment come alive or change its meaning. The debate appears to be mired in regrets over the replacement of squares (for which Americans never had much use) with shopping malls, theme parks, and virtual space. But this focus on physical space – and its ideological potential to encompass the public appearance of all people, regardless of color, class, age, or sex – loses credibility when specific classes of people are denouncing their exclusion and asserting their presence and influence in public life. The claims of these excluded people underscore the roles of *access* and *appearance* in the production and representation of public space, regardless of how it is physically or virtually constituted. They also suggest that public space is produced through public discourse, and its representation is not the exclusive territory of architecture, but is the product of the inextricable relationship between social action and physical space.

NOTES

- 1 An excellent example is Elizabeth Wilson's *The Sphinx and the City* (London: Virago, 1991).
- 2 See Alain Touraine, *Critique of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), especially the chapter entitled 'The Subject.'
- 3 See Sophia Watson and Katherine Gibson (eds), *Postmodern Cities and Spaces* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).
- 4 A different approach has been taken by Jennifer Bloomer in her Urban Still Life project, which proposes to replace heroic (male) statues with domestic (female) tableaux, apparently without challenging the symbolic order of the nineteenth-century city.
- 5 The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo's activities have been extensively documented from a human rights point of view. See Josephine Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), for interviews with the leaders and bibliographical references.
- 6 Quoted in John Simpson and Jana Bennett, *The Disappeared and the Mothers of the Plaza: The Story of the 11,000 Argentinians who Vanished* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985).
- 7 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991).