

# The Woman in the City Space

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**Modernism in pre-WWII architecture ossified rather than abolished the division of the city space into a public area, as the domain of men, and a private area assigned to women. Even female architects' involvement in designing new modernistic housing estates did not change this situation, as the example of Polish design demonstrates**

The issue of "the policy of space," inherent in the relations between architecture and the social space of a city, leads us to inquire what women's role was within such policy. Polish art history has yet to address the city perceived from the standpoint of gender ideology. In analyzing this issue, I will concentrate on the agendas of the avant-garde "city - estate - home" triad, i.e. the first modernism of the early 20th century and its utopian, visionary, and socialist traits.

## Women's Space, Men's Space

The film "Lost in Translation" portrays the story of a young woman's solitude in the modern Generic City. Walks through Tokyo are interspersed with shots of the female protagonist sitting in the window of a skyscraper hotel: the woman looks upon the endlessly expansive cityscape with the distance and indifference of an uninvolved observer. For the art historian this is of course a well-known iconographical motif, interpreted as an expression of patriarchalism and a sign of the city's spatial division into two areas: a public/male zone and a private/female zone.

Such a woman observing a city is a representation of her social condition, always located on the side of what is private. This is of course an old tradition. It was begun by Leone Battista Alberti (mid-15th century), whose architectonic and social theory, as a foundation of modern Western culture, opened up the process whereby space is gendered: divided up into the *polis*, a public, thus male zone, vs. a private, thus female zone. Alberti's texts laid the groundwork for European culture based on excluding women from the *polis*, and many theories have assisted in maintaining this exclusion. Among others, the psychiatrist Carl Westphal coined the term *agoraphobia*,

meaning women's unhealthy fear of public places. This "scientific" foundation, as a regulator of the social order, has not lost its relevance in the 20th century. It is for this reason that researchers find the image of the woman outside her "ascribed" zone, in the open space of the city, to be so stimulating. When citing Virginia Woolf's character Mrs. Dalloway, who asserts while wandering around the streets of a large city: "I love to walk about London. It really is better than walking in the village," the Polish scholar will add here the "Polish *flaneuse*" Maria Kuncewiczowa, who noted: "I wander around the city and gawk."

If we accept the tenet that the avant-garde's covert aim was to reaffirm masculinity, then in urban planning this was carried out by shaping the city in keeping with strictly "masculine" interests. For example, the futuristic



The villa of Stanisław and Barbara Brukalski in Warsaw (1929) was the first avant-garde architectural project in Poland

“Cité Industrielle” project of Tony Garnier (about 1900) is an exclusively “masculine” city: it is chiefly addressed to man, as the producer and creator of industry, while functional spaces are dominated by those that are utilized by men (extensive sporting fields, a motor racetrack, areas for aviation). Similar “masculine” traits were dominant for Le Corbusier, when he situated “gyms” for boxers atop the roofs of residential buildings (1928), and transformed bath halls containing gymnastics equipment into a “new salon,” setting forth a new style of life for men.

### Redefined by modernism?

The traditional concept of the history of the avant-garde and the so-called first modernism trivialize this aspect of space as consisting of gender-marked zones with a dominant “masculine” addressee. The prevailing conviction is that the concept of the city as a new civilization entails a new identity of genders. I want to reject the assertion (made by theoreticians and reiterated by researchers) that a sexual revolution finally took place in the avant-garde, as a result of which a New Woman was “born,” as a pillar of modern society. If we analyze the concepts of the so-called first modernism from the perspective of gender relations, we perceive that we are constantly dealing with Alberti’s same scheme here. The borders between what is private/female and what is public/male/universal are always set forth by the male architect or urban planner.

### Polish women architects

The appearance of women architects did not change this state of affairs. In Poland, women architects (Helena Syrkusowa, Barbara Brukalska, Nina Jankowska) were allowed to be involved, for the first time on an unprecedented scale, in design work on two model estates of the Warsaw Housing Cooperative (WSM), which pursued the ideas of social solidarism and the creation of a “new man.” These women, almost all of them peers born around 1900, belonged to the first generation of professional female architects and urban planners. All of them also belonged to the avant-garde of the time.

Nevertheless, the impact of such women architects upon the shaping of the housing estate’s space and its “de-genderization” was quite limited. As a result of the control mechanisms of the estates’ chief designers, the activities of female architects were mainly relegated to interiors. In the Żoliborz development, Barbara Brukalska produced a model “WSM kitchen,” as a Polish counterpart to the famous “Frankfurt kitchen” (arch. Grete Schütte-Lihotzky) produced in the same year (1927). The situation was similar in the field of urban planning. Helena Syrkusowa defined the housing estate as a “living organism,” within which she reproduced the “biological” evolutionism typical of modernism. Moreover, she perceived the housing estate as being a parallel of the



Czesław Olczewski, Archives of the PAN Institute of Art

Model kitchen from the 1920s, from a prewar advertisement

home, as its special and functional counterpart, shaped in an identical way and retaining the same social roles. She did not, therefore, liberate herself from imitating “masculine” cultural canons.

And so, traditional schemes of thought on architecture and women’s place in it did not change. Modernist housing estates, as a function of the political and social agenda, demonstrate that they were dominated by a principle of the “separation of zones” (masculine/feminine, nature/culture, private/public, sexual/universal). The accelerated process whereby these areas were feminized caused the creation of a new private space: pushed into the periphery, they formed new “ghettos,” where the clichés of cultural genderization (spaces allocated to women, children, people who were “unproductive,” ergo “superfluous”). The concepts of space introduced here (the “linear,” “strip,” “parallel” city/settlement, etc.) were entirely based on theories of linearism, which are known to be one of the manifestations of the linear dogmas of “masculine” culture and architecture.

The modernist “policy of space” so formulated was promoted as being “new.” In reality it was a double-coded game, a mask camouflaging the true aims of modernist architecture (and views of it): maintaining the traditional canons of patriarchal culture as a function of authority/domination. Change was superficial; the scheme remained intact. The woman remains in the *status quo* in this space. ■

This text is part of a paper delivered at the conference “Solitude and Informal Bonds - Sociocultural Aspects of Sexuality in the 19th and 20th Centuries,” held at the Warsaw University Institute of History, 27-29 May 2004.

#### Further reading:

- Leśniakowska M. (2002). *Architecture in Warsaw 1918-1939* (in Polish). Warszawa: Arkada Pracownia Historia Sztuki.
- Leśniakowska M. (2004). The Modernist Woman in the Kitchen - Barbara Brukalska, Grete Schütte-Lihotzky and “Kitchen Policy” (in Polish). *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa 1-2* (in print).