On Margins: Feminist Architectural Histories of Migration

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On Margins: Feminist Architectural Histories of Migration will form an issue of the peer-reviewed, open access ABE Journal, guest edited by Rachel Lee and Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi.

This project works in concert with a growing body of initiatives to write feminist histories of modern architecture through collaborative and intersectional historiographic practices: which redistribute power, co-produce solidarity, and reassess the objects and methods of architectural history. We begin by posing two arguments to architectural historians: first, that the dynamic of a situated and re-situated perspective is foundational to feminist histories of architecture, and second, that feminist historiographical approaches destabilize presumptions of fixity at the heart of the discipline. With the goal of opening the historiography to narratives, perspectives, and practices based on these arguments, we seek histories that employ feminist methods or gather empirical studies of women’s work that emerged from acts and experiences of migration performed individually or collectively—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 formal sense, and crossed borders in the colonial and postcolonial worlds, we have found repeated instances of a focus on the vernacular, the folkloric, the everyday and the anonymous. A transnational, cosmopolitan mobility oriented figures such as Sybil Moholy-Nagy, Minnette De Silva, Lina Bo Bardi, and Denise Scott-Brown toward proving grounds outside established sociocultural, geographical, and professional territory, in which they generated disciplinary debates on heritage, regionalism, and the banal. In abbreviated form, 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 Moholy-Nagy’s grain silo, De Silva’s artisan, Bo Bardi’s Bahia, and Scott-Brown’s Las Vegas each stemmed from the view of a stranger.

In narratives of migrants whose designs, built forms, and constructed environments have not been understood as authored, or of anonymous objects illegible within the frameworks of modern architectural history, 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 challenge to the discipline’s purported stabilities. We believe this form of challenge is meaningful for architectural history. Writing feminist architectural histories of
migration demands seeing the bodies of laborers 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. Such iterations, which may have lacked signature but not significance, created or unsettled architectural discursivity and enacted forms of power: as predicated upon migration and mobility, or their mirrors, restriction and confinement.

In expounding such histories, we also aim to theorize the spaces within and around which these migrations and mobilities occurred. We posit these spaces as margins. We see margins not in the sense of Derrida’s paradoxical ‘supplement,’ as aiding an original or replacing a lack, but instead as figured zones and often concrete places under continuous negotiation with territories adjacent. A margin may be understood through a variety of spatial and material cognates: periphery, border, fringe, exterior, interior, buffer, surplus, edge... Whether of land or fabric, whether architectural, structural, cultural, (geo)political, environmental or economic, whether obvious 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.

In recent literature, we have seen a feminist defamiliarization of architectural histories through readings of a range of theorists. We invite authors to interpret these and intervene with others in thinking on margins and feminist architectural histories of migration. How does Silvia Federici’s work on witchcraft or Simone de Beauvoir’s on cities inform urban history or illuminate issues of spatial restriction? How does nomadism in the writings of Gilles Deleuze or Rosi Braidotti trouble or enable architectural histories of women crossing borders by force or need? How are the subject-solidarities proposed by Judith Butler or Donna Haraway architecturally figured by or within margins? We invite authors to consider these and their own parallel questions through submissions that embed empirically grounded and culturally specific narratives in theoretical considerations of margins. Such a synthesis of migration and margins, we hope, will proffer a set of feminist architectural histories of migration to expand a global architectural historiography, opening it to new theorizations and situated historical perspectives.

Submission deadline: 1st July 2018.

Please send your submissions to abe[at]jinha.fr

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