Thinking Through Creative Merit and Gender Bias in Architecture

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A number of feminist architecture groups have recently highlighted the precarious position of women in the profession. These groups have mobilised statistics and surveys to convincingly demonstrate that gender impacts negatively on women in architecture. However, in doing so they also demonstrate that architecture is not a meritocracy, thereby confronting a critical aspect of the habitat of architecture: that its 'authority' and ethos depends on the 'fact' of creative merit. This paper utilises some aspects of Isabelle Stengers' concept of an ecology of practices as a tool to unpack architectural ideas around creative merit, drawing on empirical data provided by close observation of architects. The paper argues that the presence of women does not just illuminate the precarious habitats of architecture, but also offers chances for what Stengers calls experimental questions that open those habitats up for what they may become.

There has been a recent growth in feminist activist groups in architecture across English-speaking countries. They include *Parlour* and *Architecture+Women NZ* in Australasia, *Equity by Design (EQxD)* and *ArchiteXX* in the US, and the UK-based annual *Women in Architecture* survey and awards.[1] This growth has been propelled by gloomy statistics that detail the precarious position of women in the profession more than a generation after they became a significant proportion of those studying architecture. All the groups have mobilised these statistics along with surveys and online capabilities in order to convincingly demonstrate that gender constricts the ability of women to move into and within the profession.

However, to highlight this constriction is to also demonstrate that architecture is not a meritocracy. This confronts a critical tenet of the ideology of architecture that, as a creative field, its 'authority' depends on the meritocratic principle that creative talent determines success,[2] irrespective of any socio-economic factor such as gender, or race, or class, or sexuality. This paper explores the idea of creative merit in architecture using some concepts originally developed by Isabelle Stengers in her reflections on the science of physics as a practice.[3] Stengers writes of how physicists claim the 'truth' of physical reality to legitimise their practice. But she argues that this kind of claim risks locking physicists into reductive judgements that limit their ability to progress.[4] Something similar, I argue, happens in the practice of architecture with beliefs around creative merit.

These beliefs constitute part of what Stengers would call the 'habitat' of architects. This habitat is generated by many things including architectural education and media; the laws, structures and rules under and with which architects work; where they work; and the beliefs and assumptions that guide the actions and interactions of individual architects. The concept of habitat thus encompasses both the culture and structure of architecture, and how these affect and are affected by individual and collective actions and identities. Stengers warns that any direct confrontation to the beliefs of a practice (such as creative merit in architecture) runs the risk of triggering defensive and denial mechanisms.[5] For any activist group such as those listed above to progress change in the architecture profession – to "expand the spaces for women in architecture"[6] – Stengers' concept of an ecology of practices is useful because it provides some tools for constructing new 'practical identities' and possibilities for practices.[7] Stengers maintains, following Spinoza, that "we do not know what a practice is able to become; what we know instead is that the very way we define, or address, a practice is part of the surroundings which produces its ethos."[8] What are the ways that architects address their practice in terms of creativity and merit, given that these attitudes and aspirations form the characteristics of their habitat, or ethos?

To explore this, I will draw on a series of interviews and observations of over seventy architects (male and female) in Australia,[9] which I conducted

1   *Parlour,* http://archiparlour.org/; *Architecture+Women NZ,* http://www.architecturewomen.org.nz/; *Equity by Design (EQxD),* http://eqxdesign.com; *ArchiteXX* , http://architexx.org/; *Women in Architecture Awards and Surveys,* https://www.architectural-review.com/archive/this-opens-a-new-chapter-for-women-in-architecture/8687398.article.

2   Garry Stevens, *The Favored Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 194.

3   Isabelle Stengers, "Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices," *Cultural Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (2005): 182–96.

4   Ibid., 184.

5   Ibid., 184.

6   Parlour mission statement, www.archiparlour.org.

7   Stengers, "Introductory Notes," 186.

8   Ibid., 187.

9   Gill Matthewson, "Dimensions of Gender: Women's Careers in the Australian Architecture Profession" (PhD diss., University of Queensland, 2015).

10 "Equity and Diversity in the Australian
Architecture Profession: Women,
Work, and Leadership (2011–2014)"
(Australian Research Council Linkage
Project LP100200107, 2010). *Parlour*
also came from this project.

11 Stengers, "Introductory Notes," 188.

12 David Brain, "Practical Knowledge
and Occupational Control: The
Professionalization of Architecture
in the United States," *Sociological
Forum* 6, no. 2 (1991): 247.

13 Andrew Saint, *The Image of
the Architect* (New Haven: Yale
University Press, 1983), 61.

14 Ibid., 66.

15 Graham Winch and Eric Schneider,
"Managing the Knowledge-
Based Organization: The Case
Study of Architectural Practice,"
Journal of Management Studies
30, no. 6 (1993): 927.

16 Alexander Styhre and Pernilla Gluch,
"Creativity and Its Discontents:
Professional Ideology and Creativity
in Architect Work," *Creativity
and Innovation Management*
18, no. 3 (2009): 227.

17 Judith R. Blau, *Architects and
Firms: A Sociological Perspective on
Architectural Practice* (Cambridge, MA
and London: MIT Press, 1984), 46.

18 Laurie Cohen, Adrian Wilkinson, John
Arnold and Rachael Finn, "'Remember
I'm the Bloody Architect!': Architects,
Organizations and Discourses of
Profession," *Work, Employment &
Society* 19, no. 4 (2005): 792.

19 Matthewson, "Dimensions
of Gender," 128.

20 Cohen et al., "Remember I'm
the Bloody Architect!," 792.

21 Styhre and Gluch, "Creativity
and Its Discontents," 227.

22 Ibid., 224.

23 Katherine Sang, Stephen Ison, Andrew
Dainty and Abigail Powell, "Anticipatory
Socialisation Amongst Architects: A
Qualitative Examination," *Education
+ Training* 51, no. 4 (2009): 309.

under an Australian Research Council Linkage Project.[10] Stengers argues that by listening to practitioners, paying attention to them and being as discerning and discriminating as possible about the particular situation,[11] helps avoid slipping into habits of thinking and allows exploration of nuances in the complex systems of causes, obligations and belongings that entwine people and their practice habitat and ethos.

The creative profession

In general, for architects and the general public alike, architecture is known as a creative profession. The word 'creative' modifying 'profession' is fundamental as well as historical. David Brain describes how, in the nineteenth century, a growing ideology of artistic creativity based on drawing techniques supported the professionalisation of architecture in the US.[12] Similarly, Andrew Saint argues that in the UK at this time art was the only part of the construction of buildings that another profession had not laid prior claim to.[13] It was a successful strategy and many studies of architects detail how art and creativity are firmly embedded in definitions and self-definitions of members of the profession and in doing so of course reinforce the association.[14] For example, Graham Winch and Eric Schneider describe architectural practices in the UK as "creative organisations."[15] Similarly, discussing the profession in Scandinavia, Alexander Styhre and Pernilla Gluch assert that "architects are by definition creative and have the moral obligation to exploit such creative potentials."[16] In self descriptions, Judith Blau notes that 98% of the US architects she surveyed asserted that art and creativity were central to the profession.[17] Likewise, the architects studied by Laurie Cohen et al. in the UK described creativity as not only core to architecture, but also as the specific expertise that defines them.[18]

The desire for a creative career involving art motivated many of my interviewees into the study of architecture. However, it was also very often described as a *modified* creativity or creative *plus:* plus the academic, plus the technical, plus the practical, plus the professional.[19] For a few, architecture was also minus the perceived risks associated with a career in art per se. This modification 'plus' becomes significant because the researchers cited above all that their studied architects complained, sometimes bitterly, of the *lack* of creativity in their actual work.

Cohen et al. observe that, although 'creativity as core' was the dominant *rhetoric*, few said it was their main day-to-day concern.[20] Likewise, Styhre and Gluch describe "a discrepancy between expectation on creative self-fulfilment through architect practices and the actual everyday work."[21] They conclude that this discrepancy leads to disappointment and cynicism among architects.[22] Disappointment and disillusionment due to a lack of creativity were also recorded by Katherine Sang et al. in their investigation into the socialisation of architects in the UK.[23] Robert Gutman goes further and bluntly claims that "architecture is populated by a higher proportion

24   Robert Gutman, *Architectural Practice:
      A Critical View* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton
      Architectural Press, 1988), 110.

25   Isabelle Stengers, "Matters of
      Cosmopolitics: On the Provocation
      of Gaïa," in *Architecture in the
      Anthropocene: Encounters
      among Design, Deep Time,
      Science and Philosophy,* ed.
      Etienne Turpin (Ann Arbor: Open
      Humanities Press, 2013), 173.

26   Styhre and Gluch, "Creativity
      and Its Discontents," 226.

of alienated and disappointed men and women than any other major profession."[24] This mismatch poses a dilemma for those in the profession: to stay in an alienating environment, or to leave and in doing so relinquish an identity into which they have invested so much. Dilemmas can lead to impasses where we are unable to move, they can "take us as hostages" as Stengers puts it.[25] However, she is also convinced that a potential line of escape from such dilemmas involves interventions that 'add' to the situation. I argue that listening carefully to the architects in my interviews adds to the situation and papers like this are small interventions.

Listening to architects

Styhre and Gluch cite their interviewees describing "creative activities [as …] glimpses of light in a long night of non-creative work."[26] But very few of particularly the older architects I interviewed described their work in this way:

> *There's the whole process of creating something. And then
>   following it through, finessing it and making something
>   that's as good as it can be.*
> (Female, 16–20 years graduated)

> *There's always some design – in a kind of broad sense – involved in
>   making something happen.*
> (Male, 11–15 years graduated)

> *Details are hard! And if you see how they can be resolved… it's
>   just so good to see. It's really beautiful… totally obsessive!*
> (Female, 11–15 years graduated)

27   Cohen et al, "'Remember I'm the
      Bloody Architect!'," 782.

Cohen et al. conclude that the technical facets of architecture were subsumed within the creative discourse as a support to creativity facilitating its realisation.[27] My interviewees instead positioned the technical as creative in its own right, a form of careful creative crafting and finessing. For them, design and creativity were an absolutely integral part of the ability to technically resolve a built work. This is the 'creative plus' that drew these people into architecture in the first place. This wide-ranging process of 'creative plus' also delivered diversity into architectural work that was attractive:

> *It's nice to be doing some stuff that's technical and scientific or
>   environmental. And then other things which are just
>   completely creative. I enjoy it being diverse.*
> (Female, 0–5 years graduated)

And so my interviewees described the process and enjoyment of architecture as the intellectual intrigue and creative problem-solving

28   Matthewson, "Dimensions
      of Gender," 165.

29   Ibid., 179. Caven and Diop also document
      these social relationships as a major
      intrinsic reward for architects in their
      studies of the French and UK professions,
      Valerie Caven and Marie Diop,
      "Architecture: A 'Rewarding' Career?
      An Anglo-French Comparative Study of
      Intrinsic Rewards in the Architecture
      Profession," *Construction Management
      and Economics* 30, no. 7 (2012): 520.

30   Paul Jones, "Putting Architecture in
      Its Social Place: A Cultural Political
      Economy of Architecture," *Urban
      Studies* 46, no. 12 (2009): 2523.

31   Christine Battersby, "The Architect as
      Genius: Feminism and the Aesthetics
      of Exclusion," *albA: Scotland's visual
      arts magazine* 1, no. 3 (1991): 16.
      Also argued by David Watkins, cited
      in Blau, *Architects and Firms*, 90.

32   Battersby, "The Architect
      as Genius," 10–11.

33   Bernard Michael Boyle, "Architectural
      Practice in America, 1865–1965—Ideal
      and Reality," in *The Architect: Chapters
      in the History of the Profession*, ed. Spiro
      Kostof (New York: Oxford University
      Press, 1977), 90; Julie Willis, "Invisible
      Contributions: The Problem of History
      and Women Architects." *Architectural
      Theory Review* 3, no. 2 (1998).

34   Tim Anstey, Katja Grillner and Rolf Hughes,
      Architecture and Authorship (London:
      Black Dog Publishing, 2007), 9–10.

35   Matthewson, "Dimensions of Gender," 145.

36   Ibid., 244.

involved in bringing a building into being. This ongoing 'creative plus' process also included the social skills needed to move and execute a project, and to resolve the myriad of complex and conflicting demands and desires of all those involved.[28] Indeed, most of my interviewees, women and men alike, spoke of creative collaboration with other people as not only essential to architecture, but also part of what made its practice interesting and enjoyable.[29]

Thus, these architects had more expansive interpretations (and practices) of what creativity in the context of architecture was and might be. In particular, 'creative' in the sense of the artistic-only was ultimately considered an insufficient description of the power and attraction of the practice of architecture for them. Instead, systems of obligations and enjoyments entwined them with their practice forming their habitat. But the ethos of this particular habitat is not the dominating one in architecture.

Systems of merit

While individual architects may operate in this more nuanced habitat with this interpretation of creative practice in architecture, other constituents of architecture prioritise and position artistic creativity as the major – if not only – ethos.[30] This is most obvious in the professional systems of merit within architecture from awards to what gets published, which rely heavily on systems originally developed in the fine art field. Christine Battersby claims that, in order to establish architecture as a creative field in the nineteenth century, the history of architecture was necessarily framed to follow the art-historical convention of emphasising the work of an individual creative genius.[31] Ideas of what genius *is* vary from a particular personality to a consciousness to an energy, but in general it resides in a single person – often figured as an outsider – who, through outstanding talent, transgresses and changes the norms in a creative, artistic field. Battersby cites numerous examples of the way in which architectural history and contemporary accounts follow this convention of depicting architecture as the product of individual artistic geniuses.[32]

Many commentators describe this convention as both fraught and anachronistic,[33] even to claim single authorship of a work of architecture – genius or otherwise – is highly problematic.[34] But it is a powerful and persistent narrative that resonated strongly with the younger architects I interviewed: they wanted to be that architect of singular and outstanding design ability and vision.[35] It was also implicit in the way the owner/directors of the firms spoke of those that worked for and with them: 'design ability' was the only measure of value,[36] some were described as 'useful' but this was by no means an equivalent value. However, other usually older architects tended not to articulate this convention as an aspiration. They accepted that this kind of architect is a strong

part of the habitat of architecture, but it could also be a source of some discontentment. The disappointment and cynicism that others have observed in architects was for many of my interviewees less the absence of the creative within their work (because they defined it more broadly),[37] and more frustration that the emphasis on artistic creativity, particularly in award systems, ultimately excluded them and thereby detached them from the professional world. Of note, detachment is also described in surveys conducted in Australia in the mid-2000s where the majority of surveyed architects spoke of feeling "out of step with the profession."[38]

This detachment contributes to the dilemma for architecture and forms part of the milieu of architectural practice.[39] As long as this dilemma is framed as 'either/or' (either architecture is creative in the artistic sense or it is not; either it acknowledges wider understandings of creativity or it does not) with conflicting attachment and detachment consequences, there is an impasse which does nothing to help practitioners construct new 'practical identities' and possibilities for practices. Stengers offers the ecology of practices as a tool for thinking with and through dilemmas, and she does so in her work on the practice of physics by specifically "thinking in the presence of women."[40]

Thinking in the presence of women in architecture

There are profound and complex implications for women in architecture embedded in the convention of the genius architect revealed through creative merit. Battersby argues that the artistic genius is always male – women who transgress the norms are perceived as 'others,' rather than 'outsiders,' and thus their "deviation from tradition" is merely a struggle to be normal.[41] These conventions have structural effects; Hilde Heynen draws on Battersby's work to argue that the symbolic convention of architect-as-genius has effectively excluded women from attaining the Pritzker Prize, the highest international recognition of merit in architecture.[42] Heynen details how the work of Zaha Hadid – the only female winner – is described in strongly masculine terms, demonstrating how much the jury seemed to need to justify a female winner by emphasising the 'maleness' of the work. In addition, the idea that genius can only reside in one person (man) has contentiously ruled out female collaborators from being co-awarded.[43] While Heynen outlines movements that are pushing back against these conventions, Anstey et al. delineate some of the powerful forces that continue to maintain them in architecture.[44]

Without doubt contributing to the power of these forces are the gender-based stereotypes and biases that structure wider society. Privileging higher status to men in architecture and diminishing the work of women is an example of how architecture does not sit outside of the society and culture within which it is located. This culture classically constructs gender difference ostensibly based on biology, but because this act of

[37] Ibid., 239.

[38] Paula Whitman, *Going Places: The Career Progression of Women in the Architectural Profession* (Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology, 2005); RAIA. *The Career Progression of Men in Architecture* (Melbourne: Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 2007).

[39] Stengers, "Introductory Notes," 189.

[40] Ibid., 196.

[41] Battersby, "The Architect as Genius," 10, 16.

[42] Hilde Heynen, "Genius, Gender and Architecture: The Star System as Exemplified in the Pritzker Prize," *Architectural Theory Review* 17, no. 2–3 (2012).

[43] Ibid., 334; Anstey et al., *Architecture and Authorship,* 10.

[44] Anstey et al., *Architecture and Authorship*, 12.

45 Cecilia L. Ridgeway, "Framed Before We Know It: How Gender Shapes Social Relations," *Gender and Society* 23, no. 2 (2009): 152.

46 Emilio J. Castilla and Stephen Benard, "The Paradox of Meritocracy in Organizations," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (2010): 543; Margaret Thornton, "The Mirage of Merit: Reconstituting the 'Ideal Academic'," *Australian Feminist Studies* 28, no. 76 (2013); Margaret McNamee, and Robert K. Jr. Miller, "The Meritocracy Myth," *Sociation Today* 2, no. 1 (2004).

47 Thornton, "The Mirage of Merit," 129.

48 Magali Sarfatti Larson, *Behind the Postmodern Facade: Architectural Change in Late Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 134.

49 Battersby, "The Architect as Genius," 16.

50 Erin Cech, Brian Rubineau, Susan Silbey and Caroll Seron, "Professional Role Confidence and Gendered Persistence in Engineering," *American Sociological Review* 76, no. 5 (2011): 642.

51 Matthewson, "Dimensions of Gender," 252.

differentiation typically privileges male/masculine over the female/feminine, it produces inequality in status and material circumstances. This generates gender biases and gendered societal structures where traits, interactions, and behaviours are accepted or not, encouraged or not, and even permitted or not, depending on gender.[45] Although there is a widespread belief in modern societies that merit is the way the world works and most certainly should work, it is seldom the case.[46] Any evaluation of merit is made by fallible people who are products of their culture and the gendered systems that reinforce male privilege.[47]

This play of architectural merit conventions and gender biases were writ both small and large with the architects I studied. While all merit evaluations are subject to bias, merit is especially tenuous in artistic/creative fields because paradigms about what constitutes artistic value are regularly overthrown,[48] or, in Battersby's term, transgressed.[49] This means that not only is it only men who are permitted to transgress, but that competencies in architectural design are uncertain. Erin Cech et al. argue that professional role identity includes expert confidence – the ability "to wield the competencies and skills required of practice."[50] When a key competency is so uncertain, it becomes highly vulnerable to negative critique, as reported by some of my interviewees.

> It's hard with design because if you're: "Look at this great design idea!" Well, someone might say: "Well I think it's bloody horrible!"
> (Female, 10–15 years graduated)

> My crises are always not to do with how much I enjoy it—because I love it—but how... whether I'm doing the right thing. I feel I'm not good enough at it.
> (Female, 16–20 years graduated)

No man in my study mentioned fragility of confidence in design ability, but a significant number of the women did. This kind of self-critique is a reflection of the internalisation by women of their 'other' status, of at some level knowing that creative genius (or even merit) resides with men not women, and that they therefore don't quite 'belong.'

Gender biases especially affected perceptions of merit within the firms as acknowledged by promotion or assignment to coveted roles on projects. Although the firms maintained that the distribution of these was solely on merit, the consistent perception of staff was of opaqueness and subjectivity. That subjectivity was spoken about as generally based on anything *but* gender, such as personality, the economy, how one got on with those in power, the ability to sustain long hours, et cetera.[51] However, all these are infused by gender bias. In particular, lack of transparency in the distribution of opportunities encourages

52   Dana M. Britton and Laura Logan,
      "Gendered Organizations: Progress
      and Prospects," *Sociology Compass*
      2, no. 1 (2008): 116–17.

53   Dana Cuff, *Architecture: The
      Story of Practice* (Cambridge, MA:
      MIT Press, 1991), 44–45, 20.

54   Stengers, "Introductory Notes," 191.

55   Ibid., 184.

56   Ibid., 195.

bias.[52] Consequently, there was clear evidence of structural barriers to women's progression: women were well-represented on the lowest rungs of the office hierarchies, but their presence at the higher levels was markedly thinner. An inequity that was not appreciably alleviated by the promotions I observed over several years.

Fostering practices

The creativity in architecture is consistently emphasised as being an artistic creativity, which has significant implications, especially for women. Ideas of merit in architecture, already undermined by general societal gender bias, are subjected to the instability of artistic paradigms and usher in further gender bias due to the ideological framing of noteworthy architects as individual and male. The emphasis on artistic creativity also contributes to dissatisfaction with the architecture profession that some architects express, both men and women.

Placing design or creativity as the central element of architecture appears to be important for enabling architects to make sense of their work.[53] Integral to their identity, it is part of what 'attaches' architects to their habitat. These attachments, according to Stengers, cause practitioners to "think and create in their own demanding and inventive way."[54] Consequently, to suggest that architecture is not actually very creative, as some of the researchers previously cited (and some architects) do, is to insult that attachment. Insults, as noted earlier, cause practitioners to mobilise defensive mechanisms. However, as this paper shows, there are more aspects to creativity that attach individual architects to their practice than the artistic. Listening to architects reveals nuances, thinking through women in architecture uncovers lines of escape: rather than creativity being limited in architecture, it is the dominant understandings of that creativity that are limited.

Stengers demands that we consider each practice to be irreducibly different, that a practice cannot be diminished to being just 'like any other.'[55] This means that "the problem for each practice is how to foster its own force, make present what causes practitioners to think and feel and act."[56] Part of the force in architecture is not just its artistic tropes and traditions, what can be made present are also these more nuanced understandings of the creative profession that individual architects have negotiated – the creative *plus*. The artistic is immensely powerful and seductive but tends to eclipse all else, rendering the habitat of architects somewhat one-dimensional. The struggle of all architects, but especially the women, is the struggle to find both shade and light in this habitat. Expanding the concept of the creative in architecture helps to vary those light conditions.

Stengers maintains that continuous thinking, working, and struggling with fostering a practice's force can produce an "experimental togetherness"

57   Ibid., 195.

within which practices can "answer challenges and experiment changes."[57] I suggest that movements that counter the artistic genius model and male dominance in architecture, such as the groups mentioned at the beginning of this paper, are contributors to this experimental togetherness. They provide spaces where the individual can become collective, spaces that can challenge and change collective conversations, spaces where modifications to the propositions that attach architects can be made and, importantly, shared. In this process of proposing and sharing we can transform the ethos of our habitat. However the goal is not to reach any final formulation. The aim is to avoid habits of thinking that can trap us, to continue to think and work towards what architecture and architects might become, and to foster the force of our practice by thinking through those aspects of our habitat that might constrain and limit us.

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