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NOT A TOOLKIT

A Conversation on the Discomfort of Feminist Design Pedagogy

**Griselda Flesler
in Conversation
with Anja Neidhardt and Maya Ober /
depatriarchise design**

1. bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36 (1989), 15–23.

Questioning our assumptions and privileges, be that in a design classroom or any classroom, is not easy. Discussing how interlinked structures of oppression affect our bodies, lives, and practices often brings up emotions of fear, anger, and resistance. As educator Megan Boler puts it in her book *Feeling Power*, the effort of critically examining our values and cherished beliefs may lead to "discomforting" experiences for both educators and students. This process of moving out of one's location¹ defined by oppressive boundaries of race, gender, or class is difficult, often painful, but opens up a space of potential for change – as expressed by feminist activist and writer bell hooks – "a space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible."

Since its creation in 2017, the Chair of Design and Gender Studies at the Faculty of Architecture and Design (FADU) at the University of Buenos Aires, led by Professor Griselda Flesler, has been creating this transformative space, applying what Bolers names a “pedagogy of discomfort.”

FADU’s Design and Gender Studies is built on the belief that a profound change in design towards a more socially just and sustainable practice needs to start with design education. A crucial step in the process of transformation is to understand that the ways we see ourselves, the world, and the design discipline have been shaped by the dominant culture (which is patriarchal, Eurocentric, white, and heteronormative, to name just a few aspects). As we “engage in a collective self-reflection and develop accountability for how we see ourselves,” as Boler puts it, discomfort can provide the first step towards change.

Acknowledging that the Eurocentric discourse dominates the discussion on design education, we take a political decision to focus on voices from the margins, disrupting the dominant models, challenging the established canons and norms. We see margins as places of resistance,² but also places of hope, kindness, and generosity. This text is the result of such hopeful resistance and generosity. Created in a collaborative process that included Skype calls, writing sessions in shared online documents, translations, and much more, it has grown out of many informal

2. hooks.

3. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, *The Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2012), 12–13.

4. Hesse-Biber, 13.

5. Pierre Bourdieu, “La escuela como fuerza conservadora: desigualdades escolares y culturales,” in *La nueva sociología de la educación*, ed. Patricia de Leonardo (Mexico: Ediciones El Caballito, 1986), 103–29.



Gabriela Gugliottella, lecturer at the Chair of Design and Gender Studies, discusses the projects of the students during the final presentation. Photo: Maya Ober.



The FADU building follows the paradigm of the modernist movement. The design of the campus as a whole was entrusted to the architects Caminos, Catalano, Sacriste, and Picarel. This rectilinear building with its almost unbroken symmetry fits within the most orthodox streams of the modern movement. Repetitive lines of reinforced concrete and cantilevers form the exterior. They are separated by rows of rectangular glass windows framed with thin steel, creating a rigorous structure. The whole construction celebrates glass and concrete and lacks any ornamentation or color. Photo: Maya Ober.

conversations, text messages, and discussions. In the end feminism is extremely time-consuming.

In the conversation that you are about to read we reflect on how design education can be transformed and how this process can look like. Our intention is neither to offer rules for “good” design, nor to present a manual for a “feminist design education” – as this would demand the creation of new norms, a new hegemonic system, or a new canon. Instead of opening up alternatives to established hierarchical forms of teaching, it would situate the educational practice in direct relation to the static, rigid practices informed by patriarchy. We see a link between the need for manuals, toolkits, and answers and the dominant solutionist paradigm of design education. Instead of aiming to find quick and universally applicable solutions (which might help with some problems, but unintentionally also create new ones) we focus on asking questions, starting from the standpoint of the Other, the one who differs from the dominant norm. In doing so, we too are constantly unlearning the impulse of making that we acquired through our modern-driven design educations. Within this process of unlearning we stay uncomfortable, constantly trying to proceed with small steps and small gestures, *getting to* – as an ongoing process of imagining and realizing this transformation through design education practice, moving closer towards a more just future.

depatriarchise design: We would like to start by discussing the positivist model of knowledge construction, which in our view still prevails in design. Positivism is based on the belief that only those who are “objective” and “value-neutral” can gain “universal truths.”³ Postmodern and feminist critique of positivism has pointed out that women have been excluded from most mainstream research, and emphasizes that their perspectives and lived experiences bring crucial aspects to the process of knowledge building.⁴ However, in our daily practices as designers and educators mainly in Switzerland, Germany, and Sweden we experience the persistence of that positivist thinking, often resulting in the belief that not only design as a discipline is neutral, but that design schools and academia are neutral spaces. How do you refer to this idea of a “neutral” university space when you interact with students?

Griselda Flesler: The first thing we say to the students in the first class is that there is no neutral university space, and that the relationships that occur in the classroom or workshop are not egalitarian or equal. Here I would like to refer to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu⁵ to reflect on how the educational institution fulfills its ideological function and legitimizes the reproduction of social inequalities, constituted by class, race, age, and gender. Our public and free university can act as an example of that. At the University of Buenos Aires, everyone

can study for “free,” but the fact that there is no tuition fee doesn’t mean that there are no costs linked to studying. (For example: next to going to university students cannot, or only to a limited extent, earn money to cover their own living costs, let alone those of other family members.) As a result, meritocratic logic – so deeply embedded in our society – predominates and inequalities are constantly reproduced. Tokenization of these different categories helps to maintain this status quo. Therefore, we so often hear about “the poor child who entered the university and has got great grades” or “the woman who succeeded in running a laboratory” as justifications that the existing system actually works. The prevailing thought is that if someone only “works hard enough” they can succeed, so nothing has to change.

Since educational institutions are not gender-neutral, gender studies, from an intersectional perspective,⁶ offers us useful tools to approach our experiences as women within universities, to reflect on equity and the extension of rights. Universities are spaces for the construction, reproduction, and articulation of gender norms and regulations, and of sociosexual relations.⁷ Within design education, my colleagues and I believe that using a gender-critical lens does not limit our focus only to female practitioners and their work, trying to rewrite them into the existing canon. An intersectional feminist approach goes beyond mere leveling with patriarchal structures, since it proposes a way of thinking about the conditions in which projects are being formulated and the manner in which design works. This implies that we understand design



The building of the FADU from outside. Photo: Paco Zea García.

6. Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991), 1241–99.

7. Rafael Blanco, *Universidad íntima y sexualidades públicas: La gestión de la identidad en la experiencia estudiantil* (Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2014), 13.

8. Nelly Perazzo, *El arte concreto en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Gaglianone, 1983), 10.

9. Verónica Devalle, *La travesía de la forma: Emergencia y consolidación del Diseño Gráfico (1948–1984)* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2009), 249.

10. *nueva visión*, 1951, quoted in Griselda Flesler, "Nueva Visión (1951–1957), Volver a ver," *tipoGráfica* 59 (2004), 44, 45.

as a significant cultural practice, capable of producing meanings and spaces.

dd: In Argentina, design education mostly happens at universities. Starting with the specific case of FADU, let us have a look at the university as a physical and ideological place. The university space often conveys the narratives of rationality, functionality, and progress rooted in modernism and interwoven with colonial structures. Griselda, from your point of view, to what extent has modernism influenced design education in Argentina?

GF: The hegemony of the modern design movement has impacted a vast number of programs around the world, and Argentina is no exception. The bases of design programs at different national universities in Argentina were influenced by some members of the Arte Concreto Invención movement. This artistic avant-garde group emerged in the mid-1940s in Argentina, introducing – for the first time at the local level – a debate already started in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century regarding the “Gute Form” and its relationship with technology.⁸

Many of the members of this movement constitute the generation of architects and designers who in the 1980s conceptualized the bases of the design programs of different national universities. One of them was Tomás Maldonado, a leading figure in the Argentine as well as the international design scene.⁹ His contacts with European counterparts such as Max Bill were the key to the introduction of the ideas of the modern movement in Argentina.

In this context, some magazines acquired relevance as advocates of the architectural culture and the design model proposed by the modern movement. Among these journals – formed by professors and students of architecture at the University of Buenos Aires – were *nueva visión* (1951–57) edited by Maldonado, and *Summa*, directed by Carlos and Lala Méndez Mosquera.

The first issue of the *nueva visión* magazine was published in 1951 and designed by Alfredo Hlito, Tomás Maldonado, and Carlos Méndez Mosquera. It followed Bauhasian parameters: from its very beginnings, this magazine proposed a strong commitment to the foundations established by the modern movement: rationality, methodology, and readability. In its editorial, it presented the aim of “promoting the synthesis of all visual arts in a sense of objectivity and functionality.”¹⁰

The modernist paradigm was perhaps useful for the creation of an unexplored field in the middle of the twentieth century in Argentina, but

also became a model of exclusion and neutralization of other local traditions and ways of designing. Now, I think it is important to question why it still impacts the teaching programs and the common understanding of design within the academic community. Especially considering that the ideal of universal design has been created in a time and place very distant from the lived reality of our students. Gender and decolonial studies are necessary to provide tools that enable us to answer these questions and to understand the influence of the Global North in our practices.

dd: Let us come back to the modern movement and its role in laying the foundations of design education in Europe and formerly colonized countries like Argentina. We can already see its influence looking at the very architecture of the FADU building.

GF: The faculty of Architecture, Design, and Urbanism and the faculty of Exact and Natural Sciences are located in two adjacent buildings specifically designed to be used as faculties, under a modernization plan that implied the creation of the University City in the sixties of the last century.

After an international background contest, the design of the campus as a whole was entrusted to the architects Caminos, Catalano, Sacriste, and Picarel.¹¹ This rectilinear building with its almost unbroken symmetry fit within the most orthodox streams

11. Gabriel Szabon et al., *Historia urbana y arquitectónica de la Universidad de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2019).

12. Joan Scott, "El género: Una categoría útil para el análisis histórico," in *Sexualidad, género y roles sexuales*, ed. Marysa Navarro and Catharine R. Stimpson (Buenos Aires: FCE, 1999), 37–75.

of the modern movement. Repetitive lines of reinforced concrete and cantilevers form the exterior. They are separated by rows of rectangular glass windows framed with thin steel, creating a rigorous structure. The whole construction celebrates glass and concrete and lacks any ornamentation or color. On entering, we find ourselves in a central open courtyard (patio), characteristic of the International Style (for example, the Mies van der Rohe campus in the USA), going three floors high and covered with a grid of concrete beams forming a network of skylights, letting daylight in. The patio in particular (which is sixteen meters high) emphasizes the immense scale of the interior, compared to which a person is very small.

dd: So, modernist norms are reflected in the content of mainstream design education while they also define the physical space of the campus. In this way, the physical structure is the direct manifestation of the contents and norms transmitted in design curricula, which, as you pointed out earlier, are based on models created by the Bauhaus and the Ulm School of Design, and which are disconnected

from the local Argentinian context. This can be observed by not only looking at what and who is present, in design history books for instance, but what or who is missing. When we look at design history and design education it becomes clear that women, indigenous people, and many other groups have been excluded. In which ways do you think intersectional feminist pedagogy can help to unmask not only patriarchal but also colonial power systems present in design?

GF: I believe that the logic of feminist pedagogy is fundamental to design education. In that sense, our work in the Chair of Design and Gender Studies is based on the concept of “gender” as a category of analysis proposed by historian Joan W. Scott,¹²

who argues that this is a crucial element in how power relations are established. Her approach uses the category of gender as a relational one, definitely disregarding the cultural interpretation of “woman” as a construct still tied to sex or to sexual differentiation. The reconfiguration of gender as a social relation means a new and radical problematization of the category “woman.” It is necessary from my point of view to understand that a feminist pedagogy should discourage the epistemological need to think about the history of one essential identity. Subsequently, the questions should be about the meaning of a practice by which a certain identity is constituted, and not about the attributes traditionally associated with the subjects of the practice itself.



Wall of Pavilion III of the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Urbanism at the University of Buenos Aires. The presence of this graffiti shows how the feminist movement is spreading around the university campus. Photo: Maya Ober.

dd: Which processes had occurred outside of the university that permitted the opening of your chair?

GF: In recent years, Argentina has passed exemplary laws that recognize the particularity of violence against women, adolescents, and girls, extended the recognition for historically marginalized groups in society (the Equal Marriage Law, the Gender Identity Law, the Humanized Labour Law, etc.), and incorporated sexual education as a human right. Argentinian public universities have been subject to renewed attention for the last five years due to the emerging process of making sexist violence visible in this space, which includes both situations of harassment and complaints of discrimination based on sexual orientation, identity, and gender expression. This process gained greater visibility from 2015, with the mobilization of the *Ni una menos* collective, the growth of the women's movement, the incorporation into feminist youth groups, and the public drafting of a "feminist agenda" and of sexual dissent.¹³ The increasing demands and claims around gender issues have had a huge impact on academia.

In the universities the demand for education with a gender perspective has spread, particularly in the social and human sciences and in an incipient way in the design disciplines.^{14,15} This demand conveys a critique of higher education, programs, curricula, and of the teaching body, as well as the allegedly neutral status of university

knowledge. And it demands a perspective that fosters a critique of universalism and a review of existing pedagogical devices.

Due to these transformations, it's become relevant to also investigate the changes that are taking place on the "inhabited" scale of the university space itself,^{16,17} which advocates hospitality of different expressions of gender and sexuality. In recent years, gender, queer, and sexuality studies have begun to be interested in the role that architecture and geography play in the experience of bodies. Subsequently they have developed an attentive perspective on the projectual logic of space based on heteronormative systems and started to question the anonymous and "neutral" institutionalized architectural approach. It's become necessary to develop an analysis that takes the design of space into account and that pays attention to the voices, forms of agency, and subjectivities of different actors and how they use these spaces.

dd: You've just spoken about recent developments. But you were interested in looking at design from a gender perspective much earlier. What did you experience when you started sharing your thoughts in the context of the university and the design field in particular?

GF: When fifteen years ago I started thinking about design from a gender perspective, I encountered many prejudices and objections regarding the relevance of revealing these issues

13. Silvia Elizalde, "Hijas, hermanas, nietas: Genealogías políticas en el activismo de género de las jóvenes," *Revista Ensamblajes en sociedad, política y cultura* 4, no. 8 (2019), 86–93.

14. Griselda Flesler, Valeria Durán, and Gabriela Gugliottella, "Inclusión de la perspectiva de género en el campo proyectual," *Ciencia, Técnica y Mainstreaming Social* 2 (April 2018), 43–51.

15. Griselda Flesler, "Queering fadu: Perspectivas de género para desbordar las disciplinas de diseño," in *Actas de las XXXII Jornadas de Investigación XIV Encuentro Regional* (FADU-UBA, 2019).

16. Henri Lefebvre, *La producción del espacio* (Madrid: Capitán, 1974).

17. Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

18. Elizabeth Kamarack Minnich, *Transforming Knowledge* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990), 145–75.

in the design field. Generally during lectures at my faculty, "gender" was associated with a common understanding of the term "feminism," in other words, it was interpreted in an essentialist way, by assuming that the focus would be on discussing exclusively female architects and designers while disadvantaging their male counterparts. This binary and reductionist perspective was constructed as a reinforced concrete wall. And then came the challenge of creating some cracks in this wall.

dd: How did the transformation of the curricula from within the institution look like? And how is the relationship of your chair with the world outside of the university building?

GF: In 2014, after having taught a theoretical class on the subject every year as part of our Graphic Design Department's curriculum, I presented the idea of this chair. At first, I was asked to start teaching an elective course for graduate students, which I

have been doing ever since. However, it seemed crucial to me that these subjects would already be taught at the undergraduate level, and finally, in 2016, with the support of a board of directors, the unit was unanimously approved for all students enrolled at FADU.

Currently, many of the processes taking place in Argentina regarding the struggle of women and LGBTIQ+ people directly impact the way we think about the content of our design curricula. It is significant that requests to deal with these topics today come from young students, and lecturers themselves often realize that they lack training in a gender perspective and begin to look for spaces where they can acquire it. This is something that did not happen a few years ago.

dd: Following philosopher Elizabeth Kamarack Minnich, the university is a place where "partial knowledge" is produced, pretending to be general and universal¹⁸ – partial because many groups have been systematically excluded from its creation. This situation fosters and values certain epistemologies and traditions, and marks everything and everyone outside, in-between, and beyond the narrow understanding of the "universal" norms as "other" or "non." "Non" has also become a strong denominator within the design discipline. Many buildings for example are not accessible for wheelchair users and people pushing prams. And gendered bathrooms following the male-female binary and

the absence of facilities for changing diapers are constraints that make clear that these buildings, among them university buildings, are created for certain bodies, excluding all those who deviate from the “norm” of a white, male, healthy, able-bodied person and exposing them to continuous stress.¹⁹ Forms of so-called minority stress occur for instance when a breastfeeding mother is expected to plan her day meticulously in order to navigate an environment that was not designed for her, spending time and energy that she could otherwise invest in, for example, her actual work.^{20, 21} This issue also concerns the question of who feels legitimated to learn and work within these buildings (and thus in academia). In your view, to what extent does the very structure of buildings reaffirm who is entitled to study or work there, and who does “not belong”? And how do you deal with this in your chair?

GF: We already know that the hegemonic modes of production of urban space linked to the modern movement have delineated for decades the symbolic boundaries of permissiveness and exclusion in defining those who deserve to inhabit the public space in a city and those who do not. In *Bodies That Matter*,²² philosopher Judith Butler introduces the concept of “abject bodies” and states that pointing out the abject is essential for the normative and normal scope to be established. Butler discusses how regulatory schemes produce not only the terrain of

intelligible bodies but also a domain of unthinkable, abject, unliveable bodies. When design contributes to building this “normality,” it hides the privilege of some subjects and establishes marks of visibility in those bodies that escape the norm. That’s how privilege works: privilege is invisible to those who have it.

In our teaching, we work on projects that question this “universal subject” that only represents the privileged. In addition to the interesting projects that students develop within the course, one of the things that gives me the most satisfaction is to see how students transfer this discourse to other courses and question the ways in which they are taught design, and, out of that, develop successful proposals that improve and complexify the ways we are designing.

dd: It seems that only a radical rethinking of these norms will enable us to open curricula to new forms of knowledge production.²³ In what ways can the incorporation of a gender studies perspective transform design curricula and enable us to revisit the dominant paradigms within design? And how do you in your chair apply these thoughts in practice?

GF: When starting the Chair of Design and Gender Studies at FADU,²⁴ I wanted to merge the practice of design with the debates already initiated a few decades ago in Argentina by gender studies scholars, discussing the ways of building knowledge in various

19. Jane Darke, "Women, Architects and Feminism," in *Making Space: Women and the Man-Made Environment*, ed. Matrix (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 11–25.

20. Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013).

21. Kathryn H. Anthony, and Megan Duferne, "Potty Parity in Perspective: Gender and Family Issues in Planning and Designing Public Restrooms," *Journal of Planning Literature* 21, no. 2 (2007), 267–94, doi.org/10.1177/0885412206295846.

22. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993).

23. Marilyn Jacoby Boxer, "Challenging the Traditional Curriculum," in *Women in American Higher Education: A Feminist Perspective*, ed. Becky Ropers-Huilman, Barbara Townsend, and Judith Glazer-Raymo (Needham Heights, MA: Ginn Press, 1998), 493.

24. The Chair of Design and Gender Studies at FADU-UBA was founded in 2017 and was the first chair of its kind in South America. Since its creation, over a thousand students have completed the program.

25. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994).

disciplines. This union of theory and practice²⁵ has scarcely been present, neither in teaching and practice nor in the historical accounts and discourses regarding the legitimization of architecture and design.

Integrating a gender lens into the skills-oriented field of design education allows us to establish adequate theoretical tools for, on the one hand, understanding the sociocultural formation of gender stereotypes, and on the other, developing situated and nonstandardized designs. This leads to a design process that considers social differences and structural inequalities.

What does it mean to design with a gender perspective? Does it mean designing spaces, products, and signs exclusively for women, as is often implied? Or is it rather concerned with reflecting the diversity that characterizes society, in all its complexities and circumstances, to generate proposals for greater inclusion and emancipation?

At the Chair of Design and Gender Studies we also use a feminist perspective to transcend disciplinary divisions. This is why we work as a multidisciplinary group of teachers (sociologists, architects, artists, industrial and graphic designers, etc.), and also practice what we call the "open door" class to which we invite guests, including specialists in cultural and gender studies.

It is our policy to promote the participation of specialists, researchers, and invited lecturers so that they can present the topics in which they specialize and that are part of the



Poster of support for the 2019 mass protests in Chile in the foyer of the FADU building. Photo: Maya Ober.

curriculum. On the other hand, this “open-door” approach also means intervening in the space outside the classroom, to reclaim public space by defining what it is and who has access to it. Our work does not end within the assigned classroom; on the contrary, it invades other spaces in the university building. This implies admitting that depending on the context in which we find ourselves as students or teachers, our privileges may or may not be valid and validated.

For example, my authority as a teacher is not the same within the class as in a student assembly in the hall. In the same way, my corporality feels comfortable in class but not when I walk through the campus at night to take the bus. It is important not to essentialize discomfort only in

bodies that do not conform to generic regulations. We all feel at some point that discomfort, and the “pedagogy of discomfort” that we encourage is precisely to sensitize the community that what some people feel only at one time of day, others feel at all times in university life. In that sense, design from this perspective participates in the deconstruction of an essentialist thought and invites us to look from different perspectives at the objects of everyday life, our bodies, and the spaces in which we move. We aim to create a temporary experience of discomfort in order to explore how the embodied “Otherness” is mobile and located.

dd: To see the world through the perspective of someone who is



The mural reflecting on lived experiences of gender violence, created in a performative way by 200 students and lecturers of the FADU together with Onaire Graphic Collective.

26. Sandra Harding, "Feminist Standpoints," in *The Handbook of Feminist Research*.

27. Onaire is an Argentinian graphic design collective formed by five designers, Mariana Campo Lagorio, Gabriel M. Lopatin, Gabriel Mahia, Sebastián Puy, and Natalia Volpe. The group has developed a working method called "graphic stew," which serves as a tool for their collective work. This method encourages the participation of all members and subsumes in a single composition the views of each of them, thus transcending individual expression to achieve a collective statement.

28. Between 1976 and 1983, the most sinister military dictatorship in history took place in Argentina. A brief description of this epoch inevitably involves looting, abductions, torture, and disappearances – "a word that has made us tragically famous in the civilized world" (the National Commission on the Disappearance of

Persons [CONADEP], 1983). A search and campaign for the disappeared people organized by the Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo), who demonstrated in front of Government House to demand information on the whereabouts of their children. Thus the associations Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo were created during the dictatorship. Still today they meet every Thursday on the plaza and demand memory, truth, and justice. The persistent presence of these women for more than forty years in public space is undoubtedly an example and unavoidable reference for today's feminist movements.

rendered "different" and thus excluded for reasons of gender, skin color, and/or (dis)ability, to name but a few, and therefore experiences discrimination and oppression, can have the power to challenge one's worldview.²⁶ And of course, as a member of a marginalized group, reclaiming public space can have an emancipatory effect as well as a transformative one. What can this process look like? And where can it lead to?

GF: This process of *unlearning* can take the form of reclaiming space through a collective design act informed by students' perspectives and positionalities. For example, there were a few photographs of modernist designs hanging at the main entrance to our faculty, the major artery of this part of the campus, with thousands

of students passing each day. Our chair teamed up with Onaire Graphic Collective²⁷ to initiate a performative creation of a mural in order to reclaim the space in which we learn and work on a daily basis. Around two-hundred students and lecturers participated in this physical and at the same time symbolic creation. The Onaire Collective proposed that we generate a "great graphic stew" – a term that tries to think in a more autochthonous way than the much-discussed French "collage." During two intense days of work, reflection, and learning, a graphic stew on gender violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation was created. The participants used their own perspectives, reflected on gender-based violence, and reclaimed the space and agency to decide about the visual language of the campus. In doing so, they covered the modernist works. In the context of a university policy of expanding rights, this large mural is now on the wall of the main entrance of the faculty and establishes a performative dialogue with another mural dedicated to the students and teachers who disappeared during the last military dictatorship in Argentina (from 1976 to 1983). We find these performative and conversational aspects very striking, since, in Latin America, there have always been historical links between academic feminism and political struggles. In Argentina, the case of the Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo is a good example of the political role of women in public space.²⁸ There are many

studies from feminist perspectives on the resignification of the public space, which implied, and still implies, the struggle of these women in the search for memory, truth, and justice.

dd: The lived experiences of oppressed people play a crucial role when it comes to feminist knowledge-building²⁹ and can form a useful reference for design. In the case of the collaborative mural creation, each person brought in their own experience and knowledge. To what extent do you think this can be seen as an act of collaborative knowledge-building? And could we argue that, by involving design and visual expression, a new or alternative method, other than solely writing, is being put to use?

GF: Certainly the creation of the collaborative mural was an act of collaborative knowledge-building, because for two days we exchanged points of view about very complex concepts such as identity, symbolic violence, and gender. It was necessary to discuss the approach in order to decide what we wanted to highlight in a mural within the privileged context of a university (since it is not a mural for public roads). Many of these responses arose at the time of assembling the individual pieces in the overall design, in the decisions that were taken together to arrange the final design. I think that, as Austin puts it,³⁰ language is performative and that the act of designing is performative in itself and is therefore



Pictures of the disappeared and killed students and members of the faculty during the last military dictatorship (1976–1983) in Argentina. Photo: Maya Ober.

29. Hesse-Biber, *The Handbook of Feminist Research*; Kamarack Minnich, *Transforming Knowledge*.

30. J. L. Austin, "Lecture IX," in *How to Do Things with Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 108–19.

31. bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003).

32. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1968), 44–60.

33. Freire, 60–98.

34. Freire, 61.

35. Rafael Blanco, *Escenas militantes: Lenguajes, identidades políticas y nuevas agendas del activismo estudiantil universitario* (Buenos Aires: Clacso, 2017), 11.

an excellent methodological tool. We are not the same and we do not think the same after that wonderful meeting of designers, and nor is the faculty the same. Although I don't think design will change the world, it is a visibility tool and can be disturbing, in the sense of mobilizing the status quo. On the other hand it is attractive for the youngest and this cannot be overlooked if we want to legitimize the extension of rights from the base and not by imposing them.

dd: The conversational aspect of this project is also very interesting, especially since there seems to be a huge lack of conversation within hierarchical spaces. There is always the danger of a classroom becoming a space of domination, not only between teacher and student but also among students themselves.³¹ Discrimination, harassment, and assault make schools and universities unsafe spaces. Philosopher Michel Foucault says that power circulates, and Paulo Freire speaks of a narrative of the traditional student-teacher relationship.³² The question is, how can we break this cycle or narrative? How can we avoid the reproduction of domination in our

educational practices? And how can we create more horizontal relationships based on dialogue and love as Freire suggests?³³

GF: We have to facilitate dialogue by reclaiming the right to speak, so that we can achieve what Freire proposes. The University of Buenos Aires is public, free, and based on a cogoverning system, which means professors, graduates, and students take part in the main decision-making processes, hence they can equally participate in "the united reflection and action."³⁴ The student body is politically active, which creates interesting tensions and exchanges within the academic dynamics. According to social scientist Rafael Blanco, "the political is constitutive of the student experience in the public university, both for those who are more or less continuously engaged in an organization and for those who participate sporadically or not at all."³⁵ Blanco also sustains that the intimate and ordinary problems have impacted and redefined both the political agenda of the student organizations and the forms of politicization of university actors. Within this context, spaces are resignified (for example an all-gender bathroom on our campus) as well as the very content of what is taught. And once these doors are open, one can not close them again. Even though changes are at times slow, the debate culture is vivid and present within the university. Therefore, I find it interesting to think of design as a tool for those changes. I like to believe that

we have the possibility to redefine the university space.

dd: This is a powerful thought, especially since buildings like those of universities actively participate in the construction of our own sexual subjectivity. Since our experiences as students or educators within the campus are directly connected with our body and the bodies of others existing within the same space, the meaning of the space crosses through our subjectivity and our experiences. Design often participates in the policing of our sexual subjectivity and gender identity, reinforcing the binary. This is definitely the case with bathrooms. Studies reveal that conventional public toilet design, for instance, creates dangerous spaces for transgender and gender-nonconforming people.³⁶ You mentioned the all-gender bathroom on your campus that challenges the status quo of male-female restrooms in your university. How did this bathroom come into being and what role did a gender studies and design perspective play in it?

GF: In order to create conditions in which students feel belonging, we proposed in 2017 to the university government the creation of an all-gender bathroom, rejecting certain universalist and essentialist conceptions about identity and gender. For the past years, the gender narrative has been growing as part of activist agendas by students, increasing the number of demands directed at the

36. Jody L. Herman, "Gendered Restrooms and Minority Stress: The Public Regulation of Gender and Its Impact on Transgender People's Lives," *Journal of Public Management and Social Policy* 19, no. 1 (2013), 65–80.

37. Marissa Renee Campos, *Queering Architecture: Appropriating Space and Process* (master's thesis, School of Architecture and Interior Design at the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning, Cincinnati, 2017), 85–96.



All-gender toilet sign designed by the students of the Chair of Design and Gender Studies. Photo: Maya Ober.

university authorities.

Within this process, design can be an efficient tool to create a graphic identity signage that reaffirms a political position. However, at the same time design can reproduce the fantasy that visual identities can be homogeneously and statically defined, answering the needs of rigidly determined “target groups” and promising their functionality and effectiveness. Designing the signage of the all-gender bathroom was, therefore, a challenge, since the objective was to escape from the stereotyped and binary typologies of the traditional pictographic systems. Here the queering approach was helpful, moving beyond the static understanding of signage towards a fluid and digital one.

As a response to the creation of the bathroom, an interesting phenomenon happened: the walls of the newly reclaimed space got covered with “Thank you” graffiti. Usually used to express discontent, graffiti here became an affirmation of the space.

dd: So, the queering approach in design thanks to its fluidity allows us as designers to operate outside of restrictive binaries.³⁷ Therefore it directly influences the design process, shifting it from the traditional, static one, confined by a specific set of norms and parameters, to a fluid, hybrid one, enabling flexibility and multiple readings. This happened in the case of the bathroom signage, which is an animation and moves beyond traditional static infographics.

GF: Exactly. This approach enables us not only to deal with women and their production, but allows us to think about the conditions surrounding the development of projects and how the design of objects and spaces functions as a signifier process. Studying the fall of the old polarities in which Western culture used to oscillate – active/passive, inside/outside, master/slave, true/false, animate/inanimate, man/woman, among many others – allows us to rethink the way we design. Rejecting static categories enabled the students to create this infographic that defies accepted design norms and challenges the universalist paradigm of design.

dd: How does the fact that your university is public and free influence the transformation of the curricula and commitment to social justice?

GF: It implies that the whole society supports through taxes the structure of the public university. This means that there is a strong commitment from the entire academic community to contemporary social problems, and also that relations with spaces and movements outside of academia are constantly promoted.

Within this structure, we have developed a project based on some local and national laws that challenge us from a gender perspective. Approximately two hundred twenty students participate in this class. For the final project, they work in interdisciplinary groups of five (from different departments: architecture,

graphic design, industrial design, fashion, and cinema).

dd: What are the laws that you work with?

GF: We work with the following laws:

1. Protocol of Institutional Action for the Prevention and Intervention in Situations of Violence or Gender Discrimination or Sexual Orientation (Resol. CD no. 4043/2015) established for the entire University of Buenos Aires.³⁸
2. Comprehensive Protection Law to Prevent, Punish, and Eradicate Violence against Women in the Areas Where They Develop Their Interpersonal Relationships (Law 26,485).
3. Humanized Childbirth Law (Law 25,929).
4. Law of Existence of Sizes (Law 3,300).
5. Law of Promotion and Public Awareness on Breastfeeding (Law 26,873).
6. Gender Identity Law (Law 26,743).
7. Comprehensive and Inclusive Sex Education (Law 26,150).

Starting from the problematics of these laws and taking into account the thematic axes of the course (feminist critique of universalism, fallacy of neutrality, collaborative design, new paradigm of identity as narration and not as essence, critique of heteronormativity, queer approach, and criticism of the binarisms of modernism), a design project is developed.

dd: How did the students develop designs starting from these laws? Can you give us some examples of what was created in this course?

GF: One group of students, for instance, created *Mobiliarie*, a furniture system for schools that looks at different corporalities and dynamics within the classroom. Framed in the Law of Comprehensive Sexual Education, this project breaks with the classic hierarchical setup of traditional pedagogy. By delving into the micro-scenario of the daily life of the classroom, the students decided to create furniture of various sizes and materials and to configure elements that accept different bodies, activities, dynamics, and uses. The outcome is meant to be diverse, nomadic, and undetermined, and it does not consolidate the rigid and static furniture found in traditional classrooms. Students and teachers are not restricted by the furniture through homogenizing and disciplinary design. They can actually design and redesign the furniture on their own and according to the spatiotemporal grids of their activity, depending on the remodeling of learning situations, experiences, processes, and itineraries. With the help of these furniture elements, the bodies, which are in constant transformation, are going to develop a design that responds to their needs at that specific moment. From there arises the importance of having different morphologies and elements available for use. This shows the significance of the pupils' participation

38. In Argentina, theorizing about violence from the perspective of the different contexts where it occurs had a growing proliferation at the national level that led to reflection in public universities for the design of specific institutional instruments for this space. The University of Buenos Aires was no stranger to this general scenario and in 2015 its higher council approved the protocol.

39. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 149–81.

in the combination of the different modules arranged from the exploration of objects in the classroom.

dd: So, the students approach projects by questioning the “universal norms” of design and using abject bodies as their starting point. How does it reoccur in other projects developed in this class?

GF: Yes, indeed. There is also, for example, *Regulate*, a fragmented adjustable dummy (mannequin) made from a thermoformed cardboard structure covered with knitted fabric. Through a one-inch pipe system with plastic screws it allows each fragmented area – waist, hips, shoulders, chest, and abdomen – to be adjusted to the desired size and to also generate volume. This project departs from considering that communications technologies and biotechnologies are the decisive tools for giving new utilities to our bodies.³⁹ So, by designing a new tool the students created alternative criteria for apparel design. This design can be seen as a proposal towards the rupture of hegemonic and universalist models used in fashion

design schools. Generally, the tools used in fashion design education, such as the mannequin or the figurine, perpetuate the hegemony of certain bodies and also construct the students’ perception of themselves, who often do not fit their own figurine and do not have access to tools with alternative measurements. Starting from the basic structure of the dummy, the possibility arises that it can be modified to alternate measurements in the width and height of the body, and with the option of regulating its volumes as well.

dd: But it is not only about questioning the norms in order to prevent the reproduction of symbolic violence towards “other” bodies. Some of the projects tackle such phenomena as obstetric violence.

GF: Yes, here I would like to mention *Intimanta*, a project made in the context of the Humanised Childbirth Law that seeks to enable self-managed parenthood. It accompanies the pregnant person and their baby during pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum, providing assistance and intimacy to both of them, ensuring that they are the protagonists of the birth – something that often does not happen. The blanket is an intelligent object and in constant relationship with the pregnant body and the baby. During pregnancy, it allows the skin barriers to be transcended, achieving independence from an ultrasound, and allowing constant monitoring. In childbirth, it will mediate ensuring

the atmosphere that the pregnant person desires for that moment, giving the possibility of playing music, regulating the temperature, adapting to their privacy. At the last stage, it will be used to wrap and contain the baby, intermediating the relationship between the parent and the child. In this way, it is present in the three stages as a means for the intimate relationship between the two, giving shelter, assistance, and monitoring, merging the two bodies, ensuring their bonding and comfort. The parent-baby blanket is an intelligent, hybrid element that enables the dissolution of the borders between one and the other, merging into a large organism in which technology mediates.

dd: As educators and feminists, we strive to bring feminist thoughts and approaches into our teaching, but we have to continue the process of questioning the structures and institutions within which we are working. Is it possible to change the university from within, and how? What educational practices informed by feminist thought could emerge?

GF: I think feminist pedagogies and strategies for teaching design change power relations. They make us reflect on how, from our place and subjectivity, we position ourselves hierarchically. In the game of hierarchies, I can be at a disadvantage as a woman in front of my male colleagues, but in class, I can use and abuse my position as a teacher with my students. We must ask ourselves

whether we are willing to discuss our own privileges, which are always situational and relative. Who is capable of putting their privileges at risk or denouncing them? Who is able to depart from the place that enables defining what “good” design is? From our perspective, we study the conditions of possibility that enable a discipline to be configured around certain valid signifiers. It tries to include new signifiers, to fight for the sense of design and its selective traditions. We ask what are the requirements, body shapes, practices, social, and material resources? They count as indicators of who is inside and who is outside the frameworks of “good design.” What are the intelligibility frameworks from which we design?

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