FORM/female FOLLOWS FUNCTION/male: Feminist Critiques of Design

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[*Judy Attfield, a British designer and historian, discusses below the relevance of feminism to the writing of histories of design. It was considered appropriate that women's experience of design should be presented by a female writer. What emerges from her account is that design history cannot simply treat feminism as yet another addition to its range of methodologies for, as Lisa Tickner has remarked, it is a politics rather than a method. This means that feminism, at its most radical, calls into question many of the basic assumptions and practices of the discipline. The challenge of feminism is not restricted just to the lives of women because it is also relevant to men (gender encompasses the masculine as well as the feminine). Consequently, there is a need for male scholars to examine their own social identities and positions. Such a project would serve a self-critical function in respect of male design historians. If men were to take the lessons of feminism seriously, then the predominantly masculine discourse of design history would be transformed. - J. W.*]

It is impossible from a consciously female perspective to attempt any kind of survey of the critiques of design, its practice or its history without questioning the assumptions which have become an established orthodoxy. So I start from a definition of design legitimated by Pevsner's *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936) and which places Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948) on its bibliography together with the Open University's *History of Architecture and Design 1890–1939* (1975). What these texts have in common is a shared definition

of design which was first formulated at the height of the 'Good Design' movement, based on a set of principles which decreed that in answering functional requirements correctly, Beauty would logically follow.

Design history still suffers from its provenance in the Modern Movement, where to some extent it remains, sealed in a time lock which still considers form the effect of function, and a concept of design - the product of professional designers, industrial production and the division of labour - which assumes that women's place is in the home. Feminist perspectives offer design history a range of historical/critical methods which challenge the mainstream about how it defines design as a practice, about the paramaters of what type of designed objects it should examine, about what values are given priority in assessing it, and even who it calls designers.

It is more difficult, but still necessary, to attempt a definition of 'feminist' in this context, although to do so might imply a dominant, single view of feminism. But the project here is to *displace* dominant definitions in order to make space for the normally silent, hidden and unformulated dimensions of design omitted in its conventional study or literature. Broadly speaking, I refer to a 'feminist perspective' as that which acknowledges that women form a group among many in a multicultural society, with different tastes, needs, values and orders of priority because of the roles they play, the type of jobs they do and the position in society they occupy through the accident of their birth. In this context, feminism is a political position which seeks changes in the interest of women. There is no ultimate agreement as to what those changes should be nor what strategies should be used to pursue them since different cultural groups of women have different interests. It is a sensitivity to this diversity which marks out the distinction between the women's liberation campaign centred in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, from the wider, global women's movement.

To advocate design improvements in the environment and in products mainly used by women at present should not be taken as acceptance of the fact that such improvements can reinforce the traditional, subordinate place of women in society. (Many

feminist critiques of design point out how a definition of women as a subordinate group is reinforced and made to appear natural through design.) In discussing history and applying a feminist analysis to it, it is particularly relevant to be precise about the historical construction of the term 'feminist' and the changes it has undergone. Without an awareness that change is possible there is little point in taking a feminist perspective in the first place.

In the anthology *What is Feminism?* (1987) the general consensus among the contributors is that there is no one fixed definition, but many 'feminisms'. They also ask: 'Can feminism be defined simply by virtue of its object of concern - women? Is it not feminist to profess an interest in human welfare more generally?'[1] Similarly, this text includes work, not necessarily written by feminists, that is sensitive to the interests of women as well as the broader issues of gender relations.

A distinction that needs to be made is between a feminist process of historical enquiry, practice or critique of design, and a 'women-designers' approach which concerns itself solely with adding the names of women designers to the conventional account of the history of design.[2] The latter merely bolts on to an existing framework and does nothing to dismantle the hierarchy which positions women in the domestic area normally seen as subordinate.

It is symptomatic of our post-modern condition that it should be considered important to include a feminist critique of design here.[3] The current tendency to question dominant value systems and interpretations of history indicates a loss of faith in the single unitary view, which in the case of design history has always placed it in the male domain. The dominant conception prioritizes the machine (masculine) over the body (feminine). It assigns men to the determining, functional areas of design - science, technology, industrial production - and women to the private, domestic realm and to the 'soft', decorative fields of design. It places form in the feminine realm where its role is to reflect the imperatives of the 'real'. According to this kind of aesthetic theory then, form (female) follows function (male).[4]

Juliet Mitchell has argued that 'feminism is an ideological

offspring of certain economic and social conditions.'[5] Her interpretation is a positive one which attributes to feminists the ability to imagine 'yesterday's future', i.e. a today in which machines replace gruelling labour, when there is more leisure and more sexual equality. But she also points out that the women's movement emanates from the dominant middle class. Thus, it essentially presents a Western point of view from within a consumer society which requires women as a cheaper part-time, non-unionized workforce, while depending on them as the main bulk of the consuming public. It is this condition which has indeed brought some women more power but has also kept others in positions of subservience. Nicholas Coleridge, in *The Fashion Conspiracy* (1988) illustrates both these extremes in his description of the current condition of the international fashion design world where Tamil girls, under the age of 13, work in a Madras sweatshop to supply the American clothing trade, a country where some women can afford to spend $7,000 for a dress to attend a *charity* ball.

The Politics of Experience

A fundamental starting point for feminist design historians is the fact that women experience the designed world differently from men. One of the most powerful and influential critiques of town planning, Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), caused a transformation by introducing a critical element into the writing of architectural history which until then had glorified modernism without question.[6] It was precisely her female point of view which brought out new and valuable insights in the relationship between design ideals and lived experience.[7]

Design shapes the environment and makes assumptions about women's place in terms of buildings, public spaces and transport. It also provides the imagery women use to form their identity through fashion, advertising and the media generally. It assumes that particular areas of the design profession are 'women's work', thereby reflecting the predominant division of labour in society. Furthermore, it segregates the sexes through

artefacts by endowing these with unnecessary gender definitions, while neglecting the special needs of women who want their own transport, places and spaces.[8] And, as already explained, it excludes women from the determining spheres of science, technology and industry.[9]

The role of design in forming our ideas about gender power relations often remains invisible, while at the same time it makes them concrete in the everyday world of material goods. 'White goods' such as washing machines and electric cookers may reduce the heavy manual labour women perform and those designed by women may satisfy their needs better than those designed by men, but such goods are still manufactured with women in mind – the implicit assumption is that it is they who will be doing the bulk of the washing and cooking, not men – hence the division of labour by gender remains unaffected by product innovation and improvement.

Design reflects our aspirations and arouses our expectations, but it is also a process and as such has a potential for transformation. Some professional feminist designers have attempted to reform gender relations through innovatory designs.[10] Feminist historians have been and are undertaking research to bring to light those designers' achievements as well as the achievements of women working in the field whose contributions remain unrecognized. It is also vital to consider the impact that women have had historically, and can continue to exert on design by means of individual and joint consumption.[11]

'Women-Designers' versus a Feminist Critique

Isabelle Anscombe's *A Woman's Touch* (1984) gives exclusive attention to women designers who have participated in 'the history of the major design movements since the 1860s'. It helps to set the record straight by giving more emphasis to those women who did manage to penetrate the professional arena – some of them, like Charlotte Perriand[12] and Eileen Gray,[13] already known in conventional design history – but who were often overshadowed by male designers with whom they associated through professional or personal ties. However, it soon

becomes clear that this 'women-designers' approach does little except confirm the prejudice that women are inferior designers except in the so-called 'feminine' areas such as the decorative arts, textiles, interior design and fashion. Even where there was an opportunity to alter the emphasis by showing how some female designers were prevented from practising in the more exclusively male areas of design, as in the case of Eileen Gray, Anscombe fails to do so.[14]

There are other problems related to looking at women designers as the main focus. For instance, the restrictions of method in the conventional biography place them in a preset, hierarchical framework in which 'great', usually male, designers appear. Is this really because there have been no great women designers? Since Linda Nochlin's essay on women artists, written in the early 1970s, this has become a somewhat rhetorical question.[15] Design is even less of an autonomous activity than art and needs to be examined in close relationship with the social, cultural, economic and technological conditions which have nurtured its development as a practice. However, the historiography which has produced some of the seminal works of design history has established a tradition of pioneers of modern design and an avant garde aesthetic in which few women figure. There is an urgent need, therefore, to bring to light the work of women pioneers of design in order to provide role models for young women embarking upon design careers who, at present, face unwelcoming, male-dominated enclaves in architecture, engineering, product and industrial design, where all that is thought necessary to meet the needs of women is an equal opportunities policy.[16]

A considerable body of work has built up around an object-based study of the history of design, which avoids some of the more overtly sexist problems by not focusing on designers.[17] It also marks out for itself a methodology distinct from conventional art history in which the cult of the artist rubs off on the art work, thereby giving it a particular value distinct from the anonymously designed object. A women-designers approach is based on the traditions of such an art history and cannot cope with anonymous design. This is not to say that object-based

study is innocent and neutral in matters of gender. On the contrary, a hierarchy has built up around types of objects which gives importance to industrial design and the 'machine aesthetic' – i.e. the more obviously masculine – while considering areas such as fashion as trivial and synonymous with 'feminine'. But the limitations of a women-designers approach not only diminishes women, it also devalues design history as a discipline by using a borrowed and inappropriate methodology.[18]

A feminist critique makes it possible to look at women designers in a new light and to assess their work in the context of the history of a profession which has consistently marginalized them. It also suggests a methodology for design history which is not based upon aesthetics or connoisseurship, but upon a concern for people.

Use-value and Feminist Critique

Some feminist design historians are not content to satisfy academic criteria. They want their research to be of value to practising designers. They conceive of design history as contributing to an understanding of different groups' needs as part of the design process. *Making Space* (1984) by Matrix (a feminist architects' collective) is one example of an interventionist text which seeks to bring theory and practice together and to relate knowledge of the past to the present and the future.

The problems of defining an object of study appropriate to design history have been fraught by precedents set by art history. Although feminist art history does present us with an excellent body of critique and methodology, it cannot be appropriated and applied directly to design unless we treat design as if it were art. There is some measure of agreement that it need *not* just be about the appreciation of something called 'good design', nor the attribution of authorship to particular designers of certain cult objects, lest the whole exercise deteriorate into one of connoisseurship. But what it *should* be is less clear. Not only is there confusion over *what* should be looked at, but *why*.

A feminist perspective can be quite specific in its focus on use-value. By providing historical explanations for women's lack

of visibility at the production stage, it is possible to understand better why dominant masculine values are constantly reproduced in the material world. Thus a feminist critique of design history can become part of a more general movement of reform. It is at that particular intersection - between what we think and what we do - that the transitive meaning of design as a verb, as an action, can take place.

An example of mainstream history of design, Penny Sparke's *An Introduction to Design and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1986), avoids defining design because 'available definitions are varied, complex, contradictory and in a state of permanent flux'.[19] But by devoting her attention to industrial, mass-produced goods and the education and practice of professional designers, Sparke represents the conventional high ground of design history, traditionally associated with the mechanized and male-dominated areas of design where women only appear as passive consumers.

In her essay 'Made in patriarchy', Cheryl Buckley uses a critique of patriarchy and capitalism to formulate a method for a feminist history of design.[20] Patriarchy is a useful concept because it explains the dominance of masculine attributes transhistorically as a cultural phenomenon manifested by women as well as men. It serves to explain, for example, why some women contribute to the production of sexist ads which degrade women. Nevertheless, because patriarchy depends on stereotypical definitions of male/female and is basically a-historical, it presents many difficulties as an operative concept, not the least of which is the contradictory task of reconciling rather crude male/female stereotypes with a history of changing gender relations.

In matters of sexual politics where the personal is political, gender neutrality has been proposed as a strategy. In Britain it occupies a central position in recent anti-sexist education initiatives to degender activities such as sewing and woodwork, areas where design is taught in many schools. So gender neutrality has definite advantages, but there is a limit to which it can be used in the history of design when dealing with issues of sexual differentiation.

Part of the debate about what makes design different from

art has been the distinction between the functional object and the merely beautiful. This value system, entirely based on the ideology of modernism, cannot be applied to non-functional or handmade objects, nor to those which do not conform to the rules of good design. This has made it impossible to deal seriously with a whole galaxy of objects, i.e. those falling outside the prescribed category of the 'modern classic'. Omitted are fashion, ephemera and many other areas of design in which women have been most prominent; this omission therefore accounts for their lack of visibility. Contemporary cultural studies, social history and anthropology have provided a way in to a less hierarchical, non-aesthetic analysis of designed objects which allows inquiry in the kind of areas which put women back into the picture and make it possible to examine popular taste. So it is not just a case of looking only at women's concerns, but of using feminism as a starting point, as a means of transcending the limitations of conventional design history.

The purpose of a feminist critique of design and its history should be to discuss women's concerns so that women do not feel segregated or excluded in any way for reasons of gender. Though there are some radical feminists who choose permanent separatism as a form of refusal, this excludes many women as well as men. A gendered view, on the other hand, is a practical way of opening a space for discussion. It forms part of a wider move away from authoritarian, patriarchal values for both men and women. It also allows women to become involved as ungendered beings – as people who consider issues beyond those of gender: i.e. race, class, age, sexuality, religion, occupation and so on.

It should not be 'Woman' who is made the special case for treatment, but the culture which subordinates people by gender, class, race, etc., and does nothing to question the attitudes which position them as 'Other'. The concept of 'the Other' is one used to define the category of 'woman' in a negative relationship to the category of 'man'. ('Man' enjoys the privilege of being the norm – 'the measure of all things' – while 'woman' is that which deviates from it.) The acknowledgement of such a presence with particular needs and interests contests the privileged position of the dominant power. This includes the challenging of mainstream

art which insists on purity and preserves itself from contamination of the ordinary, the everyday and the common. It will also allow traffic across the borders and the entry of the 'minor' arts, the crafts, ephemera, fashion and the popular. By transgressing the normal definition of art, it can redirect the search for an impossible, timeless 'classic' towards a more practical activity.

Design history presents a suitable case for treatment as it struggles to come to terms with its relationship to art and the all-pervasive post-modernism which threatens to shatter its confident, macho value system based on the prime importance of industrial production.

While post-modernism cannot replace the rules it shatters with anything nearly as comforting as the harmony and belief in technological progress offered by the myth of modernism, it does enable a decentred shift in the way in which we look at the world, and how we relate to it – not an unfamiliar experience to women who are accustomed to occupying the margins.[21] Feminist practice in design, history and critique offers a point at which a criterion can be constructed which doesn't refer everything back to market forces or abstract aesthetics.

Objects and Subjects

Having established in general terms what a feminist critique has to offer design history, some specific instances will now be considered.

Lisa Tickner's studies of clothing provide examples of the way in which a feminist analysis can be applied to everyday items. A 1976 essay traces the emergence of trousers as a fashion for women from the 1940s through to the 1960s, viewing them as a symbolic representation of the social changes in the role of women during that period.[22] The rise of the women's liberation movement saw the adoption of masculine dress as a sign that at last women were beginning to enter the male world.

To transcend descriptive analyses of objects it is necessary to seek explanations of the particular forms of objects. In one of a series of articles published by the feminist magazine *Spare Rib*

in 1976, Tickner discussed the physical as well as the social bondage imposed by the fashionable constraints of tightly-laced corsets, foot-binding and other forms of extreme footwear such as the stiletto heel.[23] The images of captivity and eroticism these implied were attributed to the social conditions which placed women under male domination. Another conclusion was that fashion created ideal images of femininity which were 'used to keep women in their place'.[24] In addition she suggested that taking a psychoanalytic view 'may help us to understand why sex distinction in dress is such a universal phenomenon'. She also described several episodes in the history of women's dress in which attempts were made to bring about social change through dress reform.

Yet while Tickner sees the stiletto as an example of bondage, Lee Wright, in 'Objectifying gender', suggests that its popularity was more to do with assertiveness than subservience.[25] This indicates precisely the importance of not thinking of objects as if they existed in a timeless vacuum but looking at the changes in their meanings historically.

Some objects are imbued with a gender identity which appears almost natural, but in our present society many products have it thrust upon them as strategies for improving the market through the introduction of novelty and product diversification. A recent example was made by Ross Electronics, manufacturers of personal hi-fi equipment. They feminized headphones, normally thought of as gender-neutral, by making them into a range of fashion accessories called 'Stylers' and packaging them into compacts with four pairs of interchangeable plastic earpieces coloured pink, blue, green and yellow.[26]

What effect does this world of material goods have in forming our sexual and gender identities? In *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), Rozsika Parker explains how embroidery had a hand in 'the making of the feminine'. Her study is a key example of the feminist thought which has sought to upgrade embroidery, and other forms of applied arts associated with women, to the main rank of art. There has been an ongoing debate on the 'art versus craft' issue since the 1970s when feminist artists became politicized.[27] The validation of an activity like embroidery gives

visibility to the work of many women who would not otherwise be considered artists. But while some seek to be named, others prefer the craft tradition of anonymity.

Although British higher education design courses since the 1960s have tried to break down the hierarchy between art and craft, there still remains a distinct separation. It is, therefore, impossible to deal with object-based studies of design history without considering why certain types of objects have acquired a particular position of status in the hierarchy and how these relate to the areas most populated by women. Textile art and design is one which figures very prominently. In her paper 'An appropriate activity for women', Peninna Barnett quoted the figures: 'According to the Crafts Council in 1983, women make up 87% of all full-time craftspeople working in textiles and 94% of all part-timers.'[28] She observed: 'when men succeed in traditionally female areas ... they receive praise and acknowledgement disproportionate to their achievements – as in the case of painter-turned-knitter Kaffe Fassett who "discovered" the creative potential of knitting in the early '70s.' The idea that knitting did not exist until a man discovered it is clearly untrue, but does show how work is validated by masculine attention.

A feminist perspective reveals just how relevant it is to consider how objects *form* subjectivity. In the case of embroidery, Parker demonstrates how it was both domesticated and feminized at a particular historical period, and how it was used in the education of little girls to inculcate the ideals of femininity. The gender of the designer cannot be ignored once we have been alerted to the possible bias this gives its assessment. Therefore, it is vital to relate objects to subjects by placing the 'things' into the world of people, i.e. the context which gives them meaning. A distinction needs to be made, for the purposes of analysis, between the superimposed meaning – the image invented by the ad-man – and the way that people actually use objects to say things about themselves. The creation of images does not necessarily determine the meaning of their consumption by individual consumers. This will be discussed later in the section on the representation of femininity in the lives of women.

There is a tendency to suppose that an object-based study

can somehow lead to a more 'objective' investigation. But, as Pierre Bourdieu so succinctly put it: 'The objectification is always bound to remain partial and therefore false, so long as it fails to include the point of view from which it speaks and so fails to construct the game as a whole.'[29] Therefore, in studying and writing the history of design, it is necessary to make conscious the subjectivity of the historian, for, to paraphrase E. H. Carr: 'The historian without her facts is rootless and futile; the facts without their historian are dead and meaningless. My first answer therefore to the question "What is history?" is that it is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and her facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the future.[30] The fact that Carr's original was written in the *masculine* third person singular does not detract from the value of what he said then, it just made it sound rather one-sided.

Deconstructing the Man-made Environment

Another way of applying a feminist perspective to design is to consider the role and place of women in the social division of labour and look at how this embodies socio-spatial relations in the form of the built environment.

In 1984 the journal *Built Environment* published an issue entitled 'Women and the environment' in which one of the founding members of Matrix, Jos Boys, asked the question: 'Is there a feminist analysis of architecture?'[31] In her article she discussed the way in which architecture makes a physical representation of society's perception of social relations by the form in which it organizes people in space. Traditional social conventions since the development of the ideology of domesticity have confined women to domestic interior space as the 'proper place'; so that when they find themselves in public spaces there is an underlying feeling of unease, of not belonging, even of threat. Her plea was not for a new set of rules but for conditions to make possible a critical feminist practice of environmental design which will be sensitive to women. For all the benefits derived from better designed kitchens and house interiors generally, this does not really address

the problem of women's *confinement* to the domestic domain unless we can begin to envisage these spaces as inhabited by people rather than women.

In 'The home of woman: a view from the interior', Alison Ravetz traces a history of women's contribution to the design of housing through channels not normally explored: the patronage of model housing which prioritized the importance of good design features to alleviate the work of women.[32] Although it did not question the place of women in the home, it gave precedence to a rational approach to designing over the 'facadism' which characterized so much nineteenth-century housing with its concern for social status.

With the exception of the bicycle, the history of transportation has been singularly silent on the effect it has had on women. The history of the development of the suburb has shown not only the separation of the classes but also of the genders, with transportation networks as the only connecting link between home and work. The suburb in particular is a form which segregated women from the job market and took men far enough away from the home to make it impossible for them to participate in domestic work.[33] Until very recently it has been women only who wheeled the buggies and prams for which public transport is still so ill-equipped. Even today fewer than one-third of women hold driving licences for cars which are rarely designed with them in mind. The assumption has been that public transport must be improved for *women* because it is they who are required to cope with what a recent report called 'multiple roles (paid work, domestic work and childcare)', and therefore have more 'complicated and varied journeys than men's', and that the car is 'the *male* mode of transport'.[34]

In *Home: a Short History of an Idea* (1988), Witold Rybczynski credits American women such as Catherine Beecher with being precursors of the modern rational design movement which was to bring about important changes in house design to make women's work more efficient. In this he agrees with Giedion in attributing innovation to improvements in technology.[35] Later research has revealed that in spite of the fact that innovation in housework technology has made the work more efficient, it has

not emancipated women from it.[36] Some feminists go so far as to say that the home can be identified as 'a significant sphere of the construction of gender difference'; in other words, that it is instrumental in teaching women the ideal of femininity which places them in the home as their 'natural' habitat, rather than in the outside world of paid labour.[37] This, of course, is a vast generalization which is constantly contested and needs to be put into historical perspective. Nevertheless, it does explain how gender specific some types of activities become, so that for men to do them is regarded as emasculating.

The history of the labour-saving movement has a considerable literature in which women figure as the main protagonists.[38] Much of the effort has been to elevate the status of housework to a profession in order to improve women's conditions of work and pay; also to offer them some measure of independence. This movement must be seen alongside the history of class struggle and the attempts of groups to democratize work generally. The rise of the cooperative housekeeping movement in the nineteenth century was largely due to the awareness on the part of women like Mrs H. Ellis who felt strongly that:

> The class and mass war, which is gathering force daily in our midst, is epitomised in every house which boasts a parlour and a kitchen where a sharp line is drawn between those who serve and those who are served.[39]

Dolores Hayden's study, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (1982), traces the history of feminist home design and community planning in the United States. She focuses on a group called 'material feminists' who believed that through campaigns to end economic exploitation of household labour, and by changing the physical shape of the world through design, women could attain emancipation. The most workable model they produced, among a whole variety of fantastic schemes, was the kitchen-less house. This was widely used in England too, although until recently it remained a relatively forgotten type. Lynn Pearson's account of the history of cooperative housekeeping has brought to light a surprisingly large number of houses along

these lines in which design played an important part in putting feminist ideas into practice in this country, some operating quite successfully as cooperative households until today.[40]

Men and Housewives

The division of labour offers another framework for the study of the history of design in which a number of issues important to women can be discussed. Two areas in which this division is particularly relevant are consumption and the Arts and Crafts Movement.

The Arts and Crafts Movement provided middle-class women in the nineteenth century with an entrée into the professional world of work through creative activities which were considered domestic and therefore 'respectable'. The crafts also allowed women into the arts through a side door by way of the 'minor' or applied arts. But because these produced practical and useful items rather than purely 'art' objects, they do not command as much attention or respect. Anthea Callen's study of the Arts and Crafts shows the effect of the division of labour on women in the movement and concludes that, although it created employment for middle-class women, it also reflected the social prejudice of the time which kept both class and gender in place.[41] The Art Workers' Guild, the most influential of all the Arts and Crafts organizations, barred women by statute from 1844 to its revocation in 1964.

The Arts and Crafts Movement, however, is seen more positively in Lynne Walker's study 'The Arts and Crafts alternative'.[42] She emphasizes the excellent alternative it provided for women, enabling them to become financially independent. At the same time it gave them an entry into the male-dominated world of the arts just when they were beginning one of the most politically active periods of the women's movement.

Since the nineteenth century, there have been a number of craft 'revivals' in the United States and Britain which can be seen as part of a wider movement in highly industrialized countries where craft has become a luxury and now competes with fine art for prestige. It has also provided a vehicle for challenging

the commercialization of art and the male-dominated values of both the fine arts world and the exclusively masculine world of technology and mass production. Embroidery, patchwork quilts and other female domestic skills have been presented as alternative media in feminist art.[43]

In 'Made in patriarchy' Buckley observes that Reyner Banham identified two sexes in his history of the first machine age: men and housewives.[44] This is fairly typical of the attention which women have received in design history. Their importance as consumers has been noticed where there has been an awareness of their role at the receiving end of the marketing of designed objects.[45] Just as we have seen that women's place was assumed to be in the home, so the division of labour in our society has traditionally assumed that production is men's work while women are the natural consumers. Apart from the home, therefore, the department store or supermarket is one area which has been identified as more 'naturally' female than any other public space. Remy G. Saisselin describes the department store of the nineteenth century as a 'cultural space' in which 'shopping was integral to the identity of the new woman. Shopping was liberation.'[46] Some feminists have actually identified shopping as a form of power through which the consumer can wield influence through organized purchasing groups, through campaigning for health, safety, non-sexism and other requirements.

But women are not born with a natural ability to be consumers. It is a skill which is learnt together with the formation of taste through a process which starts in the home and goes on through life. Although taste is apparently a purely individual matter, it is generally a means of identifying with a social group. Females acquire their discriminating skill through a number of cultural channels: peer groups, girls' and women's magazines, the media and advertising generally.[47] It was also learnt more directly at school in courses on home economics, in evening classes on arts appreciation, and practical instruction in housekeeping skills, crafts and accomplishments such as embroidery and flower arranging in organizations like the Women's Institute and the Cooperative Women's Guild which cater exclusively to women.

Even though crafts and their history are now gaining some credibility as an area worthy of study, there is still a lot of snobbery and resistance to considering the amateur category. This may be because the design does not conform to a particular avant garde aesthetic, but also because it derives from the extension of a primarily female activity such as knitting. When women pursue crafts in the home they are classed as hobbies rather than as professional activities and are still treated with ridicule and derision. Pat Kirkham has examined this area in her essay 'Women and the inter-war handicrafts revival', in which she records how the ideas of the Arts and Crafts Movement were carried on into the twentieth century through women's amateur pursuits.[48] There have been cases where such activities, initiated in the domestic sphere, have developed into successful businesses. A case in point is the multinational enterprise of Laura Ashley who started out making screen-printed tea towels on her kitchen table.

Suzette Worden's essay 'Women and electricity' examines the influence of women on the design of domestic appliances both through professional engineering channels as well as by bringing pressure to bear through consumer groups in the 1920s and 1930s [49] while Angela Partington's article 'Design knowledge and feminism' suggests that feminism was articulated through consumption during the 1950s.[50] This is a view which is highly contested among feminists who believe that being a 'good consumer' is just acceding to the status quo. There are many problems in discussing consumption in the context of feminism which by definition is a political stance which contests the commercial stereotype of 'femininity' used for marketing. However, feminism has a history of its own and a criticism of 1950s stereotypes made in the 1980s has the benefit of hindsight. Therefore the kind of criticism which suggests that the women of the 1950s allowed themselves somehow to be duped into being housewives devalues their work. It is not possible to uncouple the history of feminism from the particular social and economic conditions which gave rise to its existence. Juliet Mitchell has speculated that because feminism has been made possible by the conditions of capitalism, a possible outcome of

such an economy, whose goal is the endless circulation of exchange objects, might be to produce a 'social androgyne'.[51] Indeed, the expanding requirements of mass production are fast putting paid to the exclusion of men from the world of consumption where such a division actually prevents half the population being recruited as potential buyers. This is certainly proving the case in fashion where the most recent area of growth has been men's wear.

Images of Gender

In the 1960s the term 'unisex' entered the English language. It described a style of fashion which blurred the edges between male and female clothes and hairstyles. Handbags, jewellery and long hair, which had been unequivocally feminine, were now seen as suitable for either sex, ushering in a new concept in marketing with shops and hairdressers catering interchangeably for men and women.

The representation of an idealized femininity through images of fashion and beauty in the media has been an area which feminists have studied in the attempt to unwrap the myth of an essential woman and to expose it as an historical and culturally-specific fabrication. It would be impossible to review even a part of the vast literature which has dealt with this area of feminist thought in the last decade. The use of semiotics, structuralism and psychoanalytic criticism has been crucial to the development of a highly sophisticated and theoretical body of knowledge which can cope with unravelling the meanings embodied in an increasingly complex material world.[52]

There are a number of important debates relevant to the representation of femininity which cluster around the highly charged issue of pornography.[53] These need to be confronted when dealing with the history and critique of fashion, beauty and the circulation of images of women generally. In her powerful critique of pornography, Susanne Kappeler identifies 'the fundamental problem of the root of men's behaviour in the world, including sexual assault, rape, wife battering, sexual harassment, keeping women in the home and in unequal opportunities, treating them

as objects for conquest and protection - the root problem behind the reality of men's relations to women, is the way men see women, is Seeing.'[54]

More unusual have been analyses of gender from the masculine point of view. One example is Roger Cranshaw's critique of the exploitation of men's sexuality through the phenomenon of the centrefold.[55] Although rather rigid in its characterization of *Playboy* and *Penthouse* as instruments of the 'ideological state apparatuses', nevertheless it does provide a perceptive account of the way in which this type of masturbatory masculine culture developed within an increasingly alienated society in the post-war period which at the same time, paradoxically, saw itself as 'liberated'.

The only way in which men can begin to understand some of the problems of women's subjectivity is through their own experience of being masculine. It is not enough to 'deconstruct' advertisements, spot sexism and analyse stereotypes. In most cases, if the analytic exercise is objective, it only serves to remove the observer even more from the direct experience of identification, so that 'seeing' the way it works makes it appear that those who don't must be stupid and gullible.[56] We are all, to some extent, formed by the culture that surrounds us; both men and women build their sexual identities around images and behaviour which are socially prescribed. There is no such thing as a complete and identifiable set of totally feminine or masculine attributes which make up the 'essential' man or woman. The human psyche is made up of both 'male' and 'female' characteristics. As women redefine their femininity, it calls into question how men define their gender identity.[57]

The women's movement has conducted a protracted campaign to outlaw exploitative images of women, i.e. those which treat them as sex objects. In Britain at present attempts are being made to pass a bill which would ban the type of nude photographs which appear in certain popular newspapers as a matter of course. The issue is still regarded with derision by the majority of male MPs, so it is unlikely to become law in the foreseeable future. Even so, the fact that it has reached the Houses of

Parliament indicates some measure of recognition that such representations are a problem.

Elizabeth Wilson's *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (1985), deals with the issue of gender within the larger context of cultural politics as well as reviewing the debates around feminism and fashion. She regards fashion as a 'language' through which women can express themselves. This enables her to avoid patriarchal explanations which see fashion as an aspect of women's subordination to men, and which do not explain why so many women find pleasure and fulfilment in fashion. Some feminists have found ways of indulging in fashion by adopting an 'anti-style' mode which does not betray their principles. If we take a dynamic view of fashion, that is, one which holds that the meanings of objects can change over time, then by the same token 'woman' need not always signify 'oppressed subject'.

While the fantasies and lifestyles purveyed by marketing and advertising agencies, and associated with products and fashions, certainly influence people's imaginations and behaviour, they do not correspond fully to lived experience. Like desire, they exist in a permanent state of expectation. It is here that the task of recording the history of women and their lives becomes vital in order to counter the effect of the myths propagated by commercial interests. Such accounts are largely missing from design history which has seen itself as a discrete discipline recording the history of the design profession rather than as a part of a larger history. Where a more inclusive definition has been adopted it becomes legitimate to use oral and social history, economic and business history, contemporary cultural studies, anthropology, literature, feminist theory and so on. It can thus go beyond objects to look at such issues as – how does design affect women once it has entered their lives in the form of products, clothes, transportation and homes? What can women do to help design a world more amenable to their needs, one which recognizes the particularity of female culture?

Feminists have maintained that 'the personal is political' and nowhere is it more personal than in the way we construct our

identities through interrelating with the world of things.[58] It is possible that as women become more assertive, their ability to be objective will increase and as a result they will be better able to articulate their needs and desires. Wilson suggests as much. In order to be more objective it is necessary to distance ourselves from the material goods which surround us and to discover how we interact and communicate through them. Advertisers, fashion designers and marketing directors are probably among those best placed to exploit such knowledge. However, if we can begin to understand more about how the system works, we should be in a better position to control design. Ephemeral kinds of design such as fashion are clearly more accessible and open to rapid transformations than the more intractable, monumental kinds such as architecture.

The theory which explains everything simplistically by the so-called imperatives of the market economy does not attend to people's needs adequately, although it does address their desires. The depressing prospect which such a commercially orientated interpretation of design and its history presents us with is that of the imperialistic rule of 'Things' over a passive audience who conform to manipulative stereotyping without either questioning or consciously forming judgements. Unless we can go beyond a static, object-based approach based on an aesthetic analysis, it is not possible to see that there is a dynamic dimension of symbolic representation in artefacts which is more akin to language and which can be used to articulate a material world.

Daniel Miller's theory of consumption suggests that: '... in certain circumstances segments of the population are able to appropriate industrial objects and utilise them in the creation of their own image. In other cases, people are forced to live in and through objects which are created through the images held of them by a different and dominant section of the population.'[59] If cultural transformations are possible through the material world of mass consumption, design could play a positive role in the lives of women.

A feminist analysis in the discipline of design history is of key significance in the process of bringing to light the efforts women have made to shape the world in a more female image in

spite of the limitations imposed by economic imperatives and social conventions. It can also supply evidence of the changing image of women as made manifest in the material world throughout history. The interactive power of design working through objects and representations has been shown to generate change as well as to reproduce patterns of dominance. Such knowledge is vital if we are to believe and go on working for equality in gender relations. Feminist historians working in the history of design may not agree on all points of detail, method or strategy, but there is a general consensus that our efforts are directed towards a future which will not be modelled on the needs of 'Man' but which could, one day, be called 'the people-made environment'.

Notes and References

1. J. Mitchell and A. Oakley, *What is Feminism?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987). p. 3.
2. See J. Attfield, 'Defining the object and the subject', *Times Higher Educational Supplement* 1 Feb 1985 p. 26.
3. J. Attfield, 'Invisible touch', *Times Higher Educational Supplement* 19 June 1987 p. 26.
4. 'Form follows function' is a catchphrase associated with the Modern Movement in architecture and attributed to the American architect Louis Sullivan. See 'The tall office building artistically considered', in T. and C. Benton and D. Sharp (eds), *Form and Function* (London: Crosby Lockwood Staples, 1975) p. 13.
5. J. Mitchell, 'Reflections on twenty years of feminism', in Mitchell and Oakley, *What is Feminism?*, p. 48.
6. The critique of modern town planning has become associated with a simplistic, reactionary post-modernism which is only to do with styling for the market, and a loss of faith in designing as a practice concerned with people's needs. Jacobs' critique is not about the so-called 'failure of modernism' but about an interventionist approach to designing in which the designer teams up with users and works with them to achieve an environment more in keeping with their needs. Whereas Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966) which presented an aesthetic critique of modernism and a celebration of historical styles without considering social implications has been much more influential.
7. Marshall Berman acknowledges this in his book *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (London: Verso, 1985) pp. 312–29.

8. See A. Karf, 'On a road to nowhere', *Guardian* 8 March 1988.
9. See C. Cockburn, *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change* (London: Pluto, 1983) and *Machinery of Dominance* (London: Pluto, 1985); T. Gronberg and J. Attfield (eds), *A Resource Book on Women Working in Design* (London: London Institute/ Central School of Art, 1986).
10. See, for example, S. Torre, 'Space as Matrix', *Heresies* (11) 1981 pp. 51-2; D. Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (London: MIT Press, 1982).
11. See, for example, S. Worden, 'A voice for whose choice?', in Design History Society, *Design History: Fad or Function?* (London: Design Council, 1978).
12. C. Benton, 'Charlotte Perriand: Un Art de Vivre', *Design History Society Newsletter* (25) May 1985 pp. 12-15.
13. Both have been associated with Le Corbusier and have suffered from having their designs attributed to him, or having work ignored if - as in the case of Perriand - it was not done in association with him.
14. See Peter Adam's biography, *Eileen Gray* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987).
15. L. Nochlin's essay first appeared in V. Gornick and B. Moran (eds), *Women in Sexist Society. Studies in Power and Powerlessness* (New York: Basic Books, 1971) pp. 480-510. For an overview of feminism and art history see T. Gouma-Peterson and P. Mathews, 'The feminist critique of art history', *Art Bulletin* LXIX (3) Sept 1987 pp. 326-57.
16. Some design departments have responded to the needs of women by adopting a policy of positive discrimination in recruitment and in access courses, but this is still uncommon. For example, the 'Women into architecture and building' course (1985-) in the Department of Environmental Design, North London Polytechnic.
17. Represented by such texts as Hazel Conway (ed), *Design History: a Students' Handbook* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987).
18. For example see A. Forty, 'Lucky Strikes and other myths', *Designer* November 1985 pp. 16-17.
19. P. Sparke, *An Introduction to Design and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986) p. xiii.
20. C. Buckley, 'Made in patriarchy: towards a feminist analysis of women and design', *Design Issues* 3 (2) 1987 pp. 3-15.
21. I refer here to what Hal Foster calls 'a post-modernism of resistance' which is concerned with 'a critical deconstruction of tradition, not an instrumental pastiche of pop- or pseudo-historical forms, with a critique of origins, not a return to them. In short, it seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations'; from his introduction to *Postmodern Culture* (London: Pluto, 1985).

22. L. Tickner, 'Women and trousers: unisex clothing and sex role changes in the twentieth century', Design History Society, *Leisure in the Twentieth Century* (London: Design Council, 1977) pp. 56–67. Annual Conference papers of 1976.
23. L. Tickner, '... and they sewed fig leaves together', *Spare Rib* (45) April 1976; 'Fashionable bondage', *Spare Rib* (47) June 1976; 'The attraction of opposites', *Spare Rib* (49) August 1976; 'Why not slip into something a little more comfortable', *Spare Rib* (51) October 1976.
24. L. Tickner, *Spare Rib* (45) April pp. 14–16.
25. L. Wright, 'Objectifying gender: the manufacture of the stiletto heel', in J. Attfield and T. Gronberg (eds), *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design* (London: Women's Press, forthcoming 1989).
26. J. Myerson, 'Live connections', *Designweek* October 1986.
27. See T. Gouma-Peterson's and P. Mathews' review of the art versus craft debate in their paper 'The feminist critique of art history', pp. 332–4.
28. P. Barnett, 'An appropriate activity for women', in T. Gronberg and J. Attfield (eds), *A Resource Book*.
29. P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) p. 12.
30. E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (London: Macmillan, 1961) p. 30.
31. J. Boys, 'Is there a feminist analysis of architecture?', *Built Environment* 10 (1) 1984 pp. 25–34.
32. In Attfield and Kirkham (eds), *A View from the Interior*.
33. See L. Davidoff and others, 'Landscape with figures: home and community in English society' in A. Oakley and J. Mitchell (eds), *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976) pp. 139–98.
34. A. Karf, 'On a road to nowhere', *Guardian* 8 March 1988.
35. See S. Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command*, part 6: 'Mechanization encounters the household: the feminist movement and the rational household'.
36. There is much literature on this topic. See, for example, C. Bose, 'Technology and changes in the American home', in E. Whitelegg and others (eds), *The Changing Experience of Women* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1982); L. Davidoff, 'The rationalisation of housework', *Dependence and Exploitation in Work and Marriage* (London: Longman, 1976); A. Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework* (London: Martin Robertson, 1974); P. Bereano and others, 'Kitchen technology and the liberation of women from housework', in W. Faulkner and others (eds), *Smothered by Invention: Technology in Women's Lives* (London: Pluto, 1985); M. Roberts, 'The fireside and

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38. See, for instance, E. Malos (ed), *The Politics of Housework* (London: Allison & Busby, 1980); R. Schwartz-Cowan, 'The industrial revolution in the home: household technology and social change in the twentieth century', *Technology and Culture* (17) 1976.
39. H. Ellis, *Democracy in the Kitchen* (Pamphlet of a lecture, c. 1890).
40. L. Pearson, *The Architectural and Social History of Cooperative Living* (London: Macmillan, 1988).
41. A. Callen, *The Angel in the Studio* (London: Astragal, 1979).
42. For two interpretations of the Arts and Crafts Movement see A. Callen, 'Sexual division of labour in the Arts and Crafts movement', and L. Walker, 'The Arts and Crafts alternative' in J. Attfield and T. Gronberg (eds), *A View from the Interior*.
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46. R. Saisselin, *Bricabracomania: the Bourgeois and the Bibelot* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985) p. 39.
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51. J. Mitchell, *What is Feminism?*, p. 48.
52. See, for example, R. Coward, *Female Desire*; J. Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978); *Consuming Passions* (London: Marion Boyars, 1986); E. Cowie, 'Woman as sign', *M/F* (1) 1978; S. Levrant de Brettville, 'Feminist design', in R. Langdon and N. Cross (eds), *Design and Society* (Design Council, 1984).
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55. R. Cranshaw, 'The object of the centrefold', *Block* (9) 1983 pp. 26–33.
56. See J. Williamson, 'How does girl number twenty understand ideology?', *Screen Education* (40) Autumn-Winter 1981–2 pp. 80–7.
57. See also H. Franks, *Goodbye Tarzan: Men after Feminism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985).
58. See B. Sichtermann, *Femininity: the Politics of the Personal* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1986).
59. D. Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) p. 175.