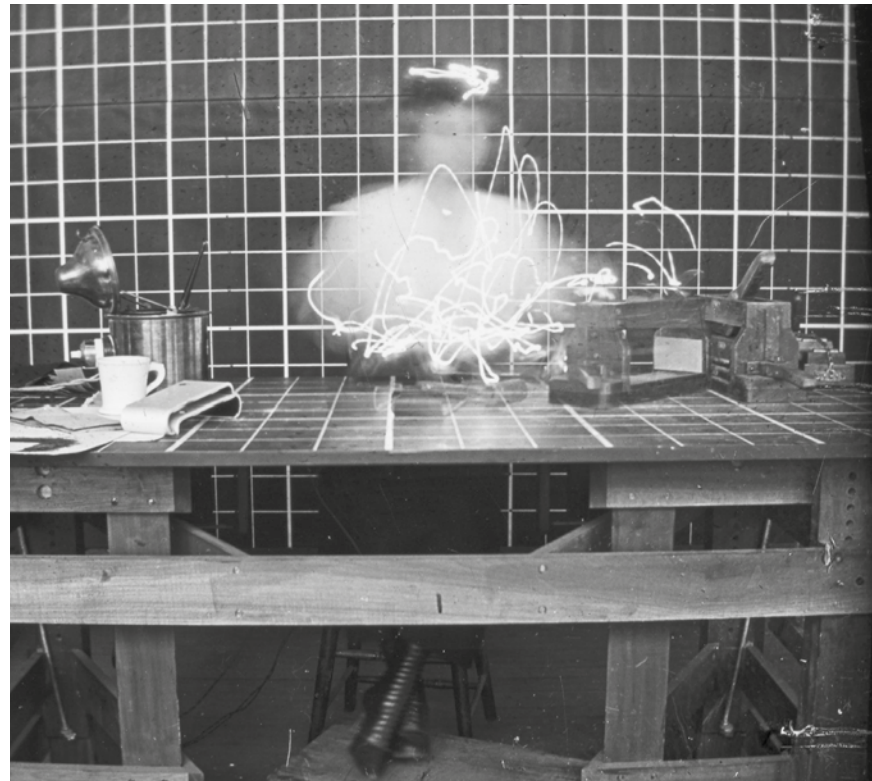


Designers' perspectives

Is there gender
in architecture?
How does space
express itself: bluntly,
quietly, or at a glance?
Does the designer hold
such power that they
can produce, or
reproduce, a whole
societal system with
only a line? Do our
selves, our spirits and
our presentations,
have anything to do
with how we design?
Six designers working
around the world write
in response:

Fernanda Canales



FRANK AND LILLIAN GILBRETH COLLECTION / ARCHIVES CENTER, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY / SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

‘Different solutions arise when you walk kilometres carrying dishes (and babies)’

Lillian Moller Gilbreth and her husband Frank undertook motion studies, attaching lights to workers' wrists, to understand how they used their bodies and moved through different tasks. This research later developed into revolutions in how domestic labour was organised, with Gilbreth planning kitchens that fit to their user's 'work curve' to minimise wasted effort

The design of a chair defines the way people sit. Likewise, a house can change the way people live, and an outfit can allow, or forbid, certain tasks and dances. Almost one hundred years ago, the rejection of corset dresses transformed the role of women in society. With no coincidence, it occurred at a time when women started to count the number of steps it took to cook an omelette, to reduce the time spent bound in domestic labour in a kitchen designed by somebody who had never used nor cleaned most of what they had designed. Details that were minor for some were life defining for others.

Since the Industrial Revolution, attention has been paid to efficiency, to maximise economic productivity. Consequently, architecture ceased to be the body-based construction that had historically related inhabitants, spaces, and local materials with specific activities and environments, turning instead to mass-produced elements made for an ideal ‘modern man’. Universal standards, such as Le Corbusier’s Modulor (a strong male measuring 1.83m), made architecture respond to systems, not persons. Activities such as breastfeeding, caretaking, and playing or resting without spending money were disregarded in the design of cities.

When the first women with degrees in architecture and design joined the profession, their designs cut housekeeping budgets in half, all while doubling comfort in living and reducing endless domestic labour journeys. Their attention was not on the appearance of spaces, but on their effects on the lives of others, especially the oppressed. This was not due to a feminine ‘natural condition’, but to hard-earned knowledge: not a quality given to women upon birth, but a standpoint more likely to come from cooking 1,095 meals every year and cleaning afterwards. Different questions are addressed and different solutions arise when you walk kilometres carrying dishes (and babies).

The very notion of efficiency shifts depending on what is being valued. Efficient for whom? Efficient at what cost?

Yasmeen Lari's designs for earthen *chulah* stoves, a safer, cleaner alternative to easily contaminated floor-mounted stoves, have been replicated across Pakistan by the communities who will use them, decorated with patterns drawing from traditions and knowledges passed down through generations of women

Yasmeen Lari

Female architects bring a welcome diversity of concepts to the table, demonstrating sensitivity to environmental and social contexts in their designs. But over the last decade and a half, while designing for disaster-affected communities in Pakistan, it is the creativity of rural women in the co-creation of structures that has struck me the most.

This became clear as I designed structures using locally sourced zero-carbon materials that local women had been familiar with throughout their lives. We know that the use of high-carbon industrialised materials tends to exclude communities, particularly women, from reconstruction efforts. On the other hand, the use of locally sourced materials has allowed me to



2023 HERITAGE FOUNDATION OF PAKISTAN

address social and ecological injustices prevalent in the humanitarian field, which are often a result of the introduction of alien forms and urban construction techniques imposed by aid agencies upon disaster-affected communities.

While engaging women in construction I saw their strength in using sustainable materials. Their lifetime practice in kneading dough results in the best application of renders and production of earth lime bricks and handcrafted terracotta floor tiles. Similarly, their skill with sewing has resulted in the best fabricated thatch roofing panels and reed matting for walls.

But I have witnessed the most stunning results in the construction of *chulah* stoves, a World Habitat award-winning design for a raised,

earthen construction to replace traditional floor-mounted stoves which emit toxic smoke and are easily contaminated. Eighty thousand of these have been self-built by rural housewives in Pakistan and each one is a designer stove. Not content with remarkable works in earth, each stove has been personalised by its creators as a work of art. Employing the age-old tradition of embellishing surfaces with a variety of patterns, whether seen in ancient buildings, woven or printed fabric, or painstakingly prepared embroideries, women have learnt patterns from their mothers and their mothers before them. Even when following standardised designs for earthen stoves or houses, the non-literate rural housewife personalises each one with her own creativity.

In Joshua Reynolds' portrait of Charles Coote, the 1st Earl of Bellamont, completed in 1774 and featured in the 2022 exhibition *Fashioning Masculinities* at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, Coote appears in the luscious robes of the Order of the Bath with feathered cap. The painting serves as a reminder that associations shift from their signifiers over time, and that what now connotes frivolity or flamboyance once conveyed wealth and power



NATIONAL GALLERY OF IRELAND

Yael Reisner

The nature of our profession is collaborative, and it is a basic need and right to have authorship be recognised – a right women have been denied throughout history. That must be dramatically changed and corrected. Yet, does gender have a role to play in design?

As an architect whose first 30 years were spent in Tel Aviv, a 20th-century city with a population which – in its earlier days – was mostly socialist, I was influenced by men and women who believed they should be engaged physically and mentally in a similar manner. I studied biology (before architecture), where I learned how our bodies differ as male and female, yet we do not differ creatively.

We have seen soft, fluid architecture at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao by Frank Gehry, at the Ron Arad studio in London, and at Amanda Levete's MAAT in Lisbon. We have seen hard, fragmented architecture by Zaha Hadid at her proposal for the Peak Project in Hong Kong and at Vitra Fire Station.

We have seen hard, chunky architecture at Gilles Retsin's pavilion at the 2017 Tallinn Architecture Biennale, and at Jeanne Gang's tower in St Louis.

These differences in architectural language are not an expression of gender, but a reflection of creative impulse, driven by an ambition for ongoing change. There is no evidence for a difference in aspiration to beauty between men and women either. Neuroscientists have observed that we design to achieve beauty, and we have seen over time that beauty is not a singular idea but its plurality prevails. Binary division is a result of nurture rather than nature, a process of conditioning, a social construct. Branding products for economic gain enhances an artificial gender divide: we still live in a culturally biased world, a male-dominated environment, but gender and its attributes are much more fluid.

Since our historical memory is too short, the 2022 exhibition *Fashioning Masculinities* at the V&A Museum is

a reminder of how pink, now associated with femininity, was in the 18th century a colour indicating power and wealth, with connotations of vigour, related for hundreds of years to social status and not to gender. In the 18th century, fluidity in form could be traced too, as men and women – admiring ancient Greek and Roman statues of gods and athletes – endeavoured to sculpt themselves to emulate unrealistic bodies. Again, a characteristic associated through most of the 20th century with a female aspiration was then prevalent among men.

Architecture is as much about human narratives and shaping identities as fashion. If gender's characteristics change across time and culture, then why should a gender divide be sought in architecture – especially in such a slow-evolving art? There is no point in trying to envisage how the future will look. It is naturally uncontrolled, surprising, as any cultural evolution. Let it be in flux. Let it just be.

Carla Juaçaba

Anna Heringer's *Modern Education and Training Institute (METI) school* in Rudrapur, Bangladesh, is made from bamboo and earth. Three classrooms on the ground floor open into earthen caverns, providing organic hollows for students to rest or explore

'A new delicacy with the territory, with the soil, must urgently appear'

Intriguingly, a female presence in architecture is intensifying in the anthropocene; an era in which another delicacy with the territory, with the landscape, with the soil must urgently appear.

Yes, some designs are extremely feminine: few men would make a clay room-utero as Anna Heringer did, nor cover a market with colourful parasols like Mariam Kamara. Frida Escobedo's skins of hollow elements, translucent in some areas, are almost sensual; as are the ceramic walls of Francesca Torzo. In fact, we expect new aesthetic gestures, or for architecture to be understood as an action over the earth: on how to land, how to touch the ground.

But some men are feminine as well: Aldo van Eyck and his city for children, for example. With all his rebelliousness, he saw the reverse of the modernising city, a vision of co-existence where the urban voids that became squares were not only for children, but also spaces of air, necessary for a city to breathe. I can't yet think of another man so delicate.

All these examples are real, tactile, but share a dream of something else.



PETER BAUERDICK

Sumayya Vally

I have memories of both my grandmothers folding samoosas at my mother's kitchen table. Though these traditions in my family have long been replaced with less communal, more 'efficient', even gourmet varieties, I clearly remember standing over my grandmother's table, forty days before Ramadan, the shortest girl in a production line of samoosa-filling cousins.

I don't know a lot about why my paternal great-grandfather arrived in South Africa in 1901, or why my maternal grandfather arrived in 1937, alone on a ship at the age of six. My parents looked perplexed when I asked. I am of the first generation at liberty to ask so many questions.

Sometimes, I think about this long elastic strip of filo, connected like the band of the Indian Ocean, and I think about both of them coming to South Africa - folding their lives edge to edge on the map just like the points and edges of the pastry in my grandmothers' hands.

You and I are products of this connected body - of ideas, commodities, military power, labour, movements, tongues - which have circulated, interfaced, and enmeshed with each other in the pattern of history. Gendered practices present

us with different trajectories to cross that history; passed down not in words or stories but in being - in the idioms we say from elsewhere; in the superstitions made for other weathers. In my grandfather's distaste for his birth country's nationalism. In what we wore and how we learned to eat with our hands and set a *dastarkhan* for guests. In South African bunny-chows (a hollowed-out half-loaf of bread filled with curry) with entirely ambiguous origins - said to have originated as a way for non-whites to transport and consume food while walking as they were not allowed sharp utensils or to linger in public space. In the technique my other 'grandmother' Yasmeen Lari used to construct the *chulah* stoves she made - where the mixing and preparation of clay draws on women's deftness in kneading chapati dough.

To be hybrid is a position of power. Our hybrid histories are held in recipes, songs and traditions - between myth, fact, *skinner* (rumour or gossip in Afrikaans). These whispers are charged with different futures - waiting latent to be manifested into form.

Passing down a recipe is writing love letters to the future.

Initiated in 2020 by Sofia Karim, the artists' movement Turbine Bagh opposes authoritarianism in India and Bangladesh, using the familiar motif of the samoosa packet as a unifying symbol in a campaign for human rights. 'Turbine Bagh' references Shaheen Bagh, a women-led sit-in protest in Delhi in 2019-2020 that was sparked by the passage of citizenship laws that excluded Muslims, and which challenged patriarchal power as well as western stereotypes of Muslim women

Illustrating passages from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Hendrick Goltzius depicts the god Chaos drawing apart sea and earth, air and fiery ether, creating the basic delineations that define elements against the swirling morass



ARTKOLORO / ALAMY

Dang Qun

In ancient Greek mythology, chaos was the original state before mankind created the world. At that time the universe was entirely indivisible: that is, no classification, no gender, no distinction of any kind. 'Chaos' is a neutral word in the grammar of ancient Greek mythology. Its root is a gaping space. That is, it means the space of the chasm. Because it is indivisible, it cannot be destroyed; it will always exist. A god in Hesiod's myth, Chaos is also the habitat of all things, including that of early humans. And because the spatial matrix of chaos has its functions, it seems to be the earliest architecture.

Then Time was introduced, resulting in the extension and separation of space, of day and night, heaven and earth, male and female: one-to-one corresponding states in duality. At first these were opposites defined to complete dualisms, but they were then endowed with certain characteristics which gradually became their own nature, for example, the difference between heaven and earth, male and female. Since then, these differences have been continuously amplified, affirming the clarification that followed chaos. The history of humankind has been accompanied by opposition ever since.

'The universe was entirely indivisible: that is, no classification, no gender, no distinction'



SOFIA KARIM

*Make a cone with a third of the length of the filo strip
Fill with filling
Fold bottom left to the top middle, press the air out of the filling
Fold top right to top left, again press the air out of the filling
Seal the last fold with flour and water paste
Fold the final edge far left to right and squeeze to seal*

