

Letting pleasure flow freely

Metaphorical houses for female inhabitants

By [all the same names as in the exhibition]

The shy house, the caring house, the house for giving birth, the hysterical house. The house for mothers, sisters and daughters, the embroidered house. These titles name a series of houses for personalities, values and ideas, which call for attention and acknowledgement in our time. The houses are metaphors for characteristics which have typically been associated with women, traditionally underestimated, but imbued with potential for rethinking ideas of residency and collaboration. This essay describes the collective making of five metaphorical houses for female inhabitants, by a group of female architects, researchers, and teachers. It places the metaphorical house within a tradition of speculative architecture, describes our practice behind and suggests a fruitful connection between making, content and form.

The metaphorical house and speculative architectures.

From Etienne-Louis Boullée's to Loos and to the late 20th century visionary projects such as Archigram, OMA, John Hejduk, Raimund Abraham and others, architects have a long tradition for using the metaphorical house as a medium for speculation. The metaphorical house reflects personalities or ideas. It becomes a three-dimensional, inhabitable representation of a person or an idea. It is a portrait expressed in architectural form.

The metaphorical house falls within a larger discourse of speculative architectures not primarily intended to be built. The role of and importance of such practices have been discussed by many, notably by Manfredo Tafuri¹, who named architects engaged in such practices 'wicked'. Whether the act of designing, for example, a hysterical house might make us qualify for this term would be injudicious speculation, and in relation to the specific speculative architecture in question in this essay – the metaphorical houses for female inhabitants – a more recent discussion provides valuable insight. Dagmar Richter² argues that those working in architectural representations exclusively were providing themselves with 'a marginal space where experiments could be conducted as cultural changes were under way'.

¹ Manfredo Tafuri, "The Sphere and the Labyrinth, Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s", MIT Press 1990

² Dagmar Richter, "a Practice of one's own: The critical copy and translation of space", in "The Architect Reconstructing her practice" edited by Francesca Hughes, MIT Press Cambridge, 1998

The connection of speculative architecture to cultural changes and spatial practices is essential. First published in 1998, many years before the current cultural changes brought forth by the MeToo-movement and new waves of feminism, Richter mentions only male architects when giving examples of seminal figures within that marginal space (El Lissitzsky, Boullé and Piranesi). But with an obvious nod to Virginia Wolf's "A room of one's own", she titles her essay "A practice of one's own" and acknowledges that if they define a practice on their own terms (and find space and time for it) female architects might 'profoundly change existing spatial possibilities and their applications'. We agree. Time is ripe for establishing new practices and using speculative architecture to discuss, analyze and perhaps even celebrate current cultural changes.

As it turns out, these practices do not only have potential for new authors and subjects, but also new types of organization, exemplified by Richter's own practice, and, as we shall account for, in the metaphorical houses for female inhabitants.

Establishing a practice

Describing her practice as being engaged in questioning authorship with the intention of breaking down hierarchical thinking, Richter regrets that 'architectural production is based on the myth of the individual author, blessed with genius, seduced by the (female) muse'. The female muse is not only a myth, but also an actual inhabitant in Adolf Loos' House for Josephine Baker. As Catherine Slessor notes, the Baker house frames the myth of celebrity as a modern totem but is also an actual proposal for a four-storey house occupying a corner site between Avenue Bugeaud and Rue du Général-Clergerie in Paris's wealthy 16th arrondissement³.

Being the epitome of the traditional metaphorical house made by one, male author, it became our outset for defining an alternative practice. Josephine Baker's house is designed for the male gaze to observe the exotic female body as an object of desire, suspended in water. Provoked and feeling an urgent need for a contemporary response, it was obvious to us to question both the method of creation and the form of representation. From Slessor, we learned that critics and scholars such as Beatriz Colomina, Anne Anlin Cheng and Christina Svendsen have sought to re-situate Josephine Baker both in her own right and in relation to Loos's aesthetic schema⁴, but as our media are primarily model and drawing, we needed to move beyond writing. Sharing experiences of teaching collectively for many years, we also had critical views of sole authorship.

We share the same everyday activities. We teach together in various constellations. We are concerned with questions on gender, architecture, and the conditions under which we work, within our institutional framework. Conditions meaning that in between part-time teaching, office

³ Catherine Slessor, "Loos and Baker: A house for Josephine", in "Women in Architecture", *Architectural Review*, March 2018

⁴ Ibid.

work, picking up children, research time, buying groceries, planning and homework, we have very limited time to meet and collaborate.

Finding ourselves working from our dinner tables and bedrooms in spring 2020 [during the Covid-lockdown], we felt an urgent need to re-establish a shared space for making. A delicate space. A strong space. A playful space. A forgiving space. A space where we could listen to each other and the material among us. This is how we started collaborating. We committed ourselves to build together.

We saw, draw, lie about, laugh and weep. When one of us stops, someone else takes over. We brew tea. We are not alone. Together, we work in an intense, caring and dedicated space where intimacy is paramount.

Necessity and intent overlaps, but the result is clear: Our practice is collective. We do not consider ourselves blessed with genius or talent, but we trust that weaving fabric of work together thread by thread leads to a contribution to a discourse in which metaphors are put to use with the intent of discussing wicked problems and cultural changes of our time.

The characters

As a straightforward way to begin, we identified women who, in our opinion, deserved a house named after them, or whose position makes them in need of one. There were many names and many reasons. For example, just think about Greta Thunberg, at that time sitting alone in front of the parliament Friday after Friday without any other architectural protection against bad weather and verbal attacks from the older generations than her yellow raincoat. Her significant message urgently needing architecture's attention. It goes without saying that numerous, anonymous women in unrestful places all over the world have obvious needs for a house, although real houses would be of more use than metaphorical ones. The list was endless and the task overwhelming. To narrow it down we decided to focus on women who are or have been practicing within the arts. The practices of Agnes Martin, Madelon Vrijendorp, Barbara Hepworth, Virginia Wolf and Josephine Baker provided us not only with ideas and values, but also gestures and actions.

The five houses were conceived as a series of interconnected assignments which we took turns writing. Initially, we were all given one of the five characters and a series of words to work from. We produced five drawings each and sent them to one another. It was intriguing to send and receive these first visual contours, learning about each house, it's muse or inhabitant (sometimes these roles merges, other times not through the interpretation of the character and the method of making the drawing.

To engage in a more complex conversation about the houses, we established a matrix in which we assigned character traits, typologies, and physical appearances. The matrix developed as a scaffold and a conversation paper – and a way of relating the houses to one another by enhancing their differences. The matrix reveals the houses as complex, with inherent conflict, and it becomes a tool for exploring the complexity of human traits through the metaphor of the house.

Constructing beds and killing darlings

“Form has always been a male preserve, as the ambiguous meaning of erecting something conceals/reveals: A primary extrovert force.” This declaration kicks off Martine de Maeseneer’s essay “Rear Window”⁵, in which she discusses the recurrent dichotomy form-function throughout recent architecture history. Both terms are essentially unstable, she concludes, but formulates function as the conceptive and female territory. The kitchen, of course, is synonymous with the female. The domain within the house in which function is the primary design driver, and where the female character resides.

Constructing form is indeed an empowering force. Appreciating and understanding material capacities and enabling constructive relations between form and intent, and material and tectonics. Being unwilling to accept de Maeseneer’s accurate observation by confronting it with action, we moved to the woodworking workshop as soon as the situation permitted [the first Covid-lockdown was partially relieved in the summer of 2020]. We began with five pieces of basswood, a base dimension and a scale, sketching directly in physical material.

We began with the bed. The most private domain of the house, and perhaps the most essential. A house without a bed is not a dwelling, one could easily argue. It is also a place in which the female inhabitant plays a significant role. The bed is the territory for rest and sleep, for sex, conception and birth, for sleeping with small children. For reading, dreaming and escaping pragmatics, market mechanisms, and utilitarian matters. A place in which vulnerability and power, pleasure and pain goes hand in hand.

After constructing the bed which best represented each character, we moved on to doors, windows, roofs and other architectural house components. Some houses resisted moving much further than being a bed, others developed into new compositions. We exchanged houses along the way and let our different personalities and design strategies influence the houses as well.

⁵ Martine de Maeseneer, Rear Window, Chapter 2, in “The Architect Reconstructing her practice” edited by Francesca Hughes, MIT Press Cambridge, 1998

The process and the limited amount of time available forced us to work fast, encouraging misinterpretations and bold moves, such as overwriting, cutting up, painting over and killing darlings.

Encouragement from a colleague

In our account for five metaphorical houses for female residents, the observant reader will by now have noticed an ongoing mixture of personal experiences and academic observations and references. Motherhood and architectural precedents seems inseparable, when describing our practice. Jennifer Bloomer's essay "Nature Morte"⁶ gave us the inspiration, courage and *carte blanche* to do so. Bloomer weaves together personal accounts of being a female student and architect with general observations on the practice of architecture so convincingly that one understands that the two cannot be separated. "I know what it means to be constructed as a thing and to be a container. I am convinced that this have an influence on the way that one sees things and containers, a taxonomy of objects into which architecture neatly fits, both in the sense of being a material mass with voids inside for holding people and furniture, and in the sense of being a vessel of cultural and social signification". The container, in her description, is a metaphor for invisible cultural structures of control and oppression, but also an actual, human experience that many women, including the authors of this essay, will feel represented by.

Bloomer, like us, likes materials. "I am entranced by matter, interested in stuff. Not only the petrified nature – wood, metal stone silicates – from which buildings are made, but bark. Bulbs, food, shells, ink, blossoms, soft metals, seeds, fur, fabric, goop. And words. I have always loved the experience of the ink and the surface of the paper as much as what I am supposed to be focused on when I am drawing. I regularly instruct students who are drawing to draw with and on what makes their pleasure flow freely."

Not only choosing the paper, drawings tools, wood species and table saws which make pleasure flow freely, but also establishing a caring, empathic collaboration is, as it might be sensed in the descriptions above been essential to making metaphorical houses for female residents. Adding to that, the empowering our practice by collaborative processes. The gratification is not to be mistaken with effortless naivete, but rather as a necessity. As we challenge a discourse in need of voices and representation of that which has primarily been seen as function (not form) and container (not contained), encouragement is constructive. It makes us thankful for and inspired by the women who cleared the path ahead of us. Feeling responsible and hopeful for the ones who will follow and challenge ours.

⁶ Jennifer Bloomer, *Nature Morte*, in *The Architect Reconstructing her practice* edited by Francesca Hughes, MIT Press Cambridge, 1998

