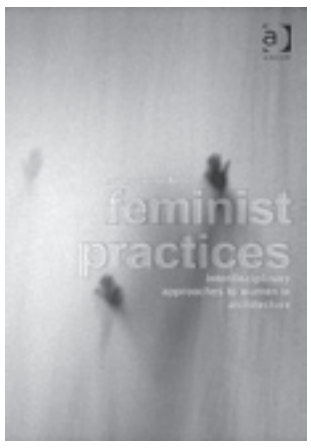

Feminist Practices: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Women in Architecture
Lori A. Brown, ed., Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011, 371 pp.
Review by Scott Sørli

Feminist Practices is assembled into four thematic groupings: design, pedagogy, design research, and communities. Apart from these sections are editor Lori Brown's introduction, conclusion, and editorial prerogatives providing coherence to an increasingly diverse and productive field. Two chapters, however, slip away from the structure of a book. Jane Rendell's chapter "Critical Spatial Practices" and Despina Stratigakos' chapter, "Inventing Feminist Practices," are placed outside of the four themes. The decision not to force-fit these two chapters into one of the four broad categories of the book allows them to open up content that doesn't necessarily conform to the other categories. This is a feminist editorial decision. Not one of content, not one of form, but one that smoothes the strictures of form to receive and hold content without forcing it to follow a rigid structure. This permission is an elegant means to accept and embrace work that would otherwise fall outside, or worse, be forced in.

Domesticity is a theme throughout the anthology. One meaning of domesticate is to tame, and the place of taming is the home. The complex, ambivalent relationships encircling domesticity provide productive territory for feminist practices in architecture. There are many territories, institutions, and subjects problematized viscously in the works of *Feminist Practices*, but for the purpose of this brief review, domesticity stands in for the whole.

The first section, "Feminist Practices of Design," features five designers whose work engages the sophisticated and subtle inter-relationships of the body and surroundings. Lori Brown asks several questions of this group in the introduction, among them: "How is privacy understood within the domestic sphere and how is this idea materially reinforced? [...] How can the furniture with which we occupy space be reconsidered and redesigned so as to neutralize any gendered associations?"[1] Domesticity has historically been seen to be feminine—a woman's place, her domain. In these practices, privacies are shown in the processes of being reinforced and undermined, genders neutralized and intensified, while all are multiplied. In Kyna Leski's "Sister" chapter, the vision of a dream home transformed into a project for a Shadow House makes a virtue of that delicious morning moment of falling back asleep just after the alarm goes off. For two sisters, one who might be a heroine, the other perhaps heroin, the shadow house nods off, "no longer recognizable, having been dramatically transformed and re-constituted [...] we no longer understand public and private, shade and shadow in the same way again."[2] This smooth drift away from a hierachical type undermines the conventions of residential construction and space planning toward a realizable dream image of (un) domestication.

The "Pedagogy" section provides examples of full-scale design-build studio practices that challenge "normative student-teacher relationships, the classroom's hierarchical structure, and the professor's role in the class."[3] It is easy to teach a class full of alpha types: praise the strong ones and watch the rest run to catch the leader. It is harder and more rewarding to engage and collaborate, to discover each student's personal aspirations, and to walk that path together. In this, Margarita McGrath's 2006 Taipei studio is exemplary, investigating the mundane and the worldly. There's a generational divide that she points to when she writes in her piece "Fishing for Ghosts": "I'm in my 40s. It *is* bold to reveal one's age, but in this discourse I think it is critical."[4] She writes of the "wave of feminism" in architecture schools that straddled the late 80s and early 90s, a time when academic institutions were struggling with the new gender parity of the student body.

Feminist Practices proposes a definition of "feminism as relational and constantly shifting."[5] Öslem Erdogdu Erkaslan and Meghal Ayra research the domestic realms of detached housing and apartments in Turkey, and courtyards in Indian domestic spaces, respectively. The movement among individuals and communities through territories can also be traced to institutions. For example, the same dearth of support can be seen in the atrophying of women's studies in academia as well. While this line of thought is beyond the scope of this review, it points to an institutional crisis at hand.

The final section, "Feminist Practices in Communities," features projects engaged within specific and varied communities. Janet McGaw, in "Urban Threads," works with homeless women (the undomesticated) to make private realms in public spaces. This empowering work is the definition of community, in practice and execution. Liza Fior and Katherine Clark of the design practice muf, equate civic work with citizen input, through the design process as much as built work. These projects are architectural examples of relational aesthetics—where the work lies in the acts that are co-construed; the civic moments that arise belong to the citizens who bring them about.

This is a very important book; the bibliography at the end of Jane Rendells' opening chapter, "'Critical Spatial Practices'," alone is worth the cost of the book. It provides a survey of feminist practices and literature from the last decade of the 1900s and the first of the 2000s, a survey that is unavailable anywhere else. Students of any gender and designers of all genders cannot claim to be adept at working in this contemporary territory without availing themselves of this resource.

I worry that because it is 'feminist' men wouldn't dream of picking it up, and that women will pause before buying it: so I appreciate the definitions of feminisms that Lori Brown provides. They have nothing to do with gender. First, she writes, "feminist practices are political acts that seek to challenge the status quo and identified relationships of power." And second, that "there are those who work to improve and better the lives and spaces of others, concerned with larger social justice efforts, but may never call themselves feminist."[6] She follows with a quote from bell hooks, who writes, "we can live and act in feminist resistance without ever using the term 'feminism.'"[7] Maybe we don't have to say it if we find the word limiting. Lori Brown challenges us to re-define the term for ourselves.

Notes

1. Lori A. Brown, ed., *Feminist Practices: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Women in Architecture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), 7.
2. Ibid., 8.
3. Ibid., 9.
4. Margarita McGrath, "Fishing for Ghosts," in Lori A. Brown ed., *Feminist Practices: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Women in Architecture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), 233.
5. Brown, *Feminist Practices*, 10.
6. Ibid., 367.
7. Ibid., 368.

Scott Sørli is currently pursuing a post-professional degree in Design Research at the University of Michigan. He co-founded and co-curates Convenience, a window gallery that provides an opening for art that experiments, engages, and takes risks with the architectural, urban, and civic realms. Visit www.conveniencegallery.com