

Women as Space/Women in Space: Relocating our Bodies and Rewriting Gender in Space

Jana Nakhal

Abstract:

This paper examines gendered urban spaces that are shaped under/by the capitalist patriarchal system. Architectural standards recreate gender, racial and class hierarchies, just as local cultural productions reinforce specific notions of women-as-space. As a result, we are left with an unchallenged reproduction of gender binaries, and a reinforcement of what women are "supposed" to be and do. In the end, this paper attempts to disrupt these binaries and hierarchies through relocating our bodies and rewriting gender in space.

“As material culture, space is not innate and inert, measured geometrically, but an integral and changing part of daily life, intimately bound up in social and personal rituals and activities.”¹

Beirut. The globalized markets of a cosmopolitan shopper. Through the display windows of Hamra street shops, clothing and shoes, cosmetics venues, hairdressers, and home supplies, the ultimate shopping space opens itself up in pinks, reds and flowery patterns specifically designed for the female user. The experience of walking in/using public spaces, uncovers a male/female spatial identity, which is intrinsically apparent in the mainstream production of space, a practice which —we argue— proves itself to be oppressive, homogenizing, and reductive.

The way in which the majority of these (semi-public) spaces are designed— the colors used, the materials, the patterns and objects spread around— suggests in a sense that women are one homogeneous clump of pink-loving teenagers, businesswomen, and matrons. On the other hand, black, blue, and metallic nuances indicate male-oriented spaces with urban rough edges, attracting the once-more monolithic alpha-male. Underlying those polarized gendered spaces survives the network of the patriarchal system in its entirety, reshuffling paradigms of class and gender.

In this paper, we will discuss existing spatial manifestations of gendered binaries while concentrating on physical and behavioral norms created by the white male and regenerated in cultural productions. Exploring the spatiality of gender under the capitalist system, this paper will rely on participatory observation as well as the analysis of reductive anthropomorphic standards.

The “spaces” we are talking about are private, public as well as semi-public. Private spaces are privately-owned quarters (private houses, balconies, gardens, rooftops, cars, etc.), public spaces (generally belonging to the state) constitute streets, public gardens and piazzas and cornice, common lands and even public transportation; and finally semi-public spaces are the privately-owned but utilized by the public (hotels, hospitals, cafes, restaurants, cinemas, etc. and religious sites and cemeteries). While the first two categories are generally clearer in their boundaries and use, the semi-public sphere (defined by Marc Auge as “non-place”²) is intrinsically forged through “the homogenization of needs and consumption patterns.” What results is a standardization of the architectural space, a phenomenon which intrinsically generates spaces we cannot appropriate, belong to, or change.³ This standardization specifically causes a lack of security and safety on one level, and an atmosphere which reinforces the existing dynamics of power and thus regenerates the patriarchal character of space, on another.

¹ Rendell, Jane. 2003, p.3

² Auge, Marc. 1995, p.15

³ Ibid.

Due to the difference in the levels of privacy between these three spaces (i.e. what is conventionally agreed upon to be acceptable in each of these spaces), the body-space relations unravel the power structures that tie them, and the underlying needs of the patriarchal system.

In the first, it is the intimate but also the practical, daily-life, individual as well as familial activities which take place; in the second, it is where the larger, communal and citizen life occurs; and in the last, more specific, social events of certain nature happen, as dictated by the local (temples, cemeteries, etc.) or globalized (hotels, airports, etc.) socio-spatial conventions.

Spaces are “gendered.” As much as a place is a product of our culture, it is in space that we project our innermost needs, but also our conscious and unconscious ideologies. Martina Löw asserts that “[g]ender and space alike are a provisional result of an – invariably temporal – process of attribution and arrangement that both forms and reproduces structures.”⁴ Both gender and space are similar in reflecting social norms into the lived experience of the everyday.

While the capitalist system uses patriarchy to shift and shuffle power hierarchies, the current conditions locate women as the weakest social component. The logical outcome would be a spatial reproduction of the power dynamics: women are subjugated to the economic and social paradigms; and the house, the street, and the café reiterate this subjugation.

In an effort to realize what a “feminine/space-designed-for-women” looks like, we had once ventured in an informal discussion with students from the architecture and design department in one of the universities in Beirut. Questions were focused around the expected physical components of such a space: its colors, patterns as well as the overall character. Surprisingly, all the answers depicted lively colored sites (warm colors preferably) with an elaborate use of curves and circles, in addition to a needed feeling of intimacy and womb-like sensations. Leslie Kanes Weisman expresses this association in her “Prologue” when she states that “women are associated with traits of nurturance, cooperation, subjectivity, emotionalism, and fantasy, while ‘man’s world’—the public world of events and ‘meaningful’ work—is associated with objectivity, impersonalization, competition, and rationality.”⁵

This exercise prompted a broader inquiry into the meaning of a “feminine space” in terms of uses and exploitation of the physical space by women, while being sensitive to the generalizing profiling this might engender. The ensuing inferences indicated 3 main premises: sex (the female body) and use, gender (the needs) and use, and the correlation between the human being and the philosophical recognition of space. At the same time, this discussion tried to answer the question “how do we ‘exist’ as gendered beings in space?”

⁴ Löw, Martina. 2006, p.7

⁵ Ibid.

The basic standard measurements and proportions for creating objects and spaces that fit and answer the proportions of the human body, technically known as anthropomorphic measurements, are based not only on the size and proportions of the male body parts, but specifically on the white European male. Starting from Leonardo Da Vinci's Vitruvius, to Le Corbusier's Modulor, "man" was the focal point and the only studied 'human' form, thereby reducing all existing human forms, into the Arian man. The examination of models such as Vitruvius and the Modulor produced unified dimensions related to 'the' human body. It actually recreated 'the' human body: male, healthy and proportionately fitting the European average. It then projected the needs of this monolithic body into space, thus our space became the physical container exclusive to that body. Whatever existed outside the accepted dimensions of that body, found itself either floating in a space much larger than his/hers, or crushed between its borders.

Löw argues that the concept of "a homogeneous whole" is part of modern societies and it exists:

"to keep the alien, the other, the diverse at 'arm's length.' Exclusion of the heterogeneous from everyday practice and thought is reflected in the construction of the modern nation-state, of the homogeneous society, the unbroken identity, of closed corporeality, etc. It is also firmly anchored in our thinking on space."⁶

Consequently, we can observe that the housing quarters (private), streets (public) and cafes (semi-public) have largely failed to answer to female users as well as "non-conforming" males.⁷ This could be seen, for instance, in the heights of washing tubs and closets in kitchens, in the location of handles on the doors of large buildings and stores, as well as on the heights of stools and chairs in cafes and bars, the sizes of the beds, etc.

The result does not only hinder the efficient use of such objects and spaces, but more significantly so, it consciously subdues the female body (and non-conforming male) as a body in space: it denies the body its right to exist, in a static state as well as in motion, and stresses its non-conformity like a constant reminder of its "handicap." The female body becomes thus disproportionate and less developed than its perfect male counterpart.

As the male macho profile is dominant, female and less macho profiles remain unseen in space, or at least can't find direct answer to their needs. Without generalizing and/or reducing what each gender is and what its needs are, this is how women and those who do not conform to gender norms for instance find themselves needing more privacy or safety in public as well private spaces. In specific, poorly-lit streets, pedestrian tunnels and bridges or under-the-bridge spaces might seem like ordinary urban areas or perfect transportation solutions, but they are in fact extremely hazardous to women of different ages. Stacked public

⁶ Löw, Martina. 2006, p.18

⁷ Non-conforming to the white male proportions

housing projects, without elevators and with poorly-lit insecure corridors might seem like a bearable housing solution. But for women they could be harassment-susceptible spaces in one case. And because the majority of mothers or domestic migrant workers are the main caretakers of children, these spaces are incredibly unpractical for caretakers and mothers of young children.

Furthermore, existing both as our sexual and gendered identities within space prompts us to recognize this correlation between our bodies and space in a political sense. In his article "Poetically Man Dwells," Martin Heidegger⁸ states that space is the only container known to us human beings outside our bodies. We can never exist without/outside of it. It is actually the only 'space' outside our bodies. So the relation which is built springs out of our innate attachment to the space. In Arabic, space is "makan" مكان, and "to be" is يكون "yakun," and 'universe' is كون "kawn," all three related through the same root "kun" كن. 'To be' is then consciously linked to being in space, in this universe. While gender is constructed into space, our whole "being" becomes intrinsically linked to this social construction (gender) of what we should "be," which means that in the current conditions, it is through space that our 'being' starts to become exclusively limited to our gender.

It is also interesting to look at the cultural conception of "women-as-space." This can be seen in classical and modern culture alike, in literature, painting, popular songs, and several social references. Such crystallization of "women as space" appears in famous works by Arab poets like Mahmoud Darwish (Palestine) and Nizar Qabbani (Syria), whose poetry was turned into popular classical songs.⁹ In these poems/songs, the woman

⁸ Heidegger, Martin. 1951, p.17

⁹

ما يفرحني يا سيدتي | أن أتكرم كالعصفور الخائف | بين بساتين الأهداب (...)| أنت امرأتي الأولى | رحمى الأول (...)| طوق نجاتي من الطوفان (...)
هاتي يدك اليمنى كي أختبأ فيها | هاتي يدك اليسرى | كي أستوطن فيها | (نزار قباني- حب بلا حدود)

What pleases me, Mistress/is to pile up like a frightened bird/Between the gardens of (your) eyelashes/... You are my first woman/... My first womb/.... My lifeguard at the floodtime/... Give me your right hand to hide in/Give me your left hand/to settle in (Qabbani, Unlimited Love; trans. Faisal)

أنا أت إلى ظلّ عينيك.. آت | أنت بيتي ومنفائي... أنت | أنت أرضي التي دمّرتني | أنت أرضي التي حولتني سماء | (محمود درويش، أنا أت إلى ظلّ عينيك)

I come to the shadow of your eyes... I come/Your are my home and my exile... you/You are my land that destroyed me/You

are my land that turned me into sky (Darwish, "I Come to the Shadow of Your Eyes.")

وأنت الثرى والسماء | ...وقلبك أخضر! | وجزر الهوى فيك مدّ | وإني طفل هواك | على حضنك الحلواً أنمو وأكبر (محمود درويش، تكبر تكبر)

You are the soil and the sky/... and your heart is green/The ebb of your love is a flow/... And I am the child of your love/In your beautiful lap/I grow.

appears as the lover whose embrace “engulfs” the man; she is the receiver of the male body, her lap surrounds him, her hands are his ‘nation’ and her role becomes that of comfort space for the loved one. She is the womb, the lap, the “land,” and the place where emotional interactions take place. While she ‘is’ the space, she seems to be forgotten ‘in space’ itself, which by itself becomes then the sole kingdom of the roaming man. “She doesn’t exist in space,” a declaration which we argue is true in both the physical proportions of space itself and the expected social use of space. The female body is thought of only in places where socially-constructed roles need ‘special’ care: the kitchen, public restrooms, changing rooms for babies in public amenities, and female-oriented shopping areas.

Other than these very specific sites, very few sites exist where the female body is taken into consideration while building private, public, and semi-public spaces. One blatant example would be “cobble,” thick (and generally inexpensive) road pavement usually used to cover sidewalks and other surfaces. It is generally known that cobbles are specifically known to be bad surfaces to walk on for high heel wearers. Still, these are widely used, everywhere, specifically on Beirut sidewalks.

Another aspect of gendered spaces appears in the binary of public-private, and the attributive characters of each of those spaces, in connection to the gender of their respective users. Setha M. Low discusses “the paradigm of the ‘separate spheres’” which originated under a capitalist patriarchy. This concept can be defined as “an oppositional and a hierarchical system consisting of a dominant public male realm of production (the city) and a subordinate private female one of reproduction (the home).” From a feminist perspective, Low writes, this division is problematic because a binary opposition that is hierarchical is constantly being reproduced.¹⁰

But this hierarchal division is not surprising: knowing that we live under a capitalist patriarchal system which dictates our gender roles, our whole existence as individuals is thus inherently directed by gendered spaces carrying the messages and orders of the capitalist patriarchal system.

As we become aware of the role space plays in our lives, and how its manipulation is taking place and is essentially dictating our behavior and perception of our bodies, the resistance to such gendered spatiality should also take place on two main levels: relocating our bodies and rewriting gender in space. As the production of spaces currently lies in the hands of the ruling authority (the capitalist patriarchal system), we should start by saying that such an endeavor could happen whenever the spatial production becomes in the hands of the masses/users.

The needed steps are related to the conception of space, both in its anthropomorphic as well as social meanings. We need to relate the spaces to our bodies, in the physical proportions both in static patterns and movement. Women and men of the third world need to produce sites which answer the needs of the

¹⁰ Low, Setha M. 2003, p.4

proportions of their bodies, instead of following standards designed to fit one form and one sex. The sizes of our body parts are different from what is currently dictated by construction books, which take into consideration white European male bodies. We should be able to develop local and personal standards to adapt spaces and objects to our differing sizes and proportions.

Our second level of action entails rewriting gender in space. Since the way we are “supposed” to act in space is physically rendered by the builder’s physically-dictated boundaries, the questions then become: How can we act upon existing spaces and “force” certain shifts in the gendered expectations? How can we negotiate the spatial imprint of our gendered realities in ways which empower us and challenge the mainstream patriarchal character of space? Both levels need to take place in the private, public, and semi-public spheres. In the intimate everyday uses and needs, in the public which has to offer safety and enjoyment, and in the semi-public which needs to adapt to the changing needs.

The gendered character of space is rarely seen, due to the fact that we are unconscious of its effect on our bodies, and the actual correlation between space and the different uses and activities we perform. Weisman expresses this unconscious influence by highlighting space as a power tool. She discusses the political practice of the “appropriation and use of space.” Because spaces have the power to constrict or sustain us, it becomes important, she argues, to intervene into how space and architecture can support women and their needs.¹¹

The production of space is currently held within the hands of the mainstream capitalist patriarchal system. Therefore, not only public amenities, but private and semi-public sites as well, consciously or not, are mimicking the system’s production of space, thus making gender (in addition to a number of other factors), an implicitly dictated character of the space itself. In this sense, we can understand that the gendered quality of space is not innocent, but necessarily created by the system and thus driving our bodies as well as our minds and tastes. It is therefore by breaking the dictated spatial guidelines of the system that we can manage to resist another tool of patriarchal and capitalist structures of power.

¹¹ Kanes Weisman, Leslie. 2003, p.7

References

- Auge, Marc. "Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity." Verso, 1 Jan. 1995. Web. 15 Mar. 2015. http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~jread2/Auge_Non_places.pdf
- Darwish, Mahmoud. "Diwan al Sha'ir: Mahmoud Darwish." *Adab Arabic Poetry*. www.adab.com/mahmoud.darwish
- Heidegger, Martin. "...Poetically Man Dwells..." *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Harper and Row, 1951. Print.
- Kanes Weisman, Leslie. "Prologue." *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*. Ed. Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner, and Iain Borden. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Löw, Martina. "The Social Construction of Space and Gender." *European Journal of Women's Studies* Copyright. SAGE Publications, 1 Jan. 2006. Web. 3 Apr. 2015. http://www.postcolonialeurope.net/uploads/Low_Martina_119.pdf
- Low, Setha M. "Embodied Space(s): Anthropological Theories of Body, Space, and Culture." Sage, 1 Feb. 2003. Web. 5 March 2015. http://blog.lib.umn.edu/willow/estudio_seminar/sethalow-embodied_spaces.pdf
- Rendell, Jane. "Introduction: 'Gender, Space'." *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*. Ed. Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner, and Iain Borden. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Qabbani, Nizar. "Diwan al Sha'ir: Nizar Qabbani." *Adab Arabic Poetry* www.adab.com/nizar.qabbani
- . "Unlimited Love." Trans. Faisal. *Transparent Language*. <http://blogs.transparent.com/arabic/nizar-qabbani-unlimited-love-part-ii/>