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«Citations can be Feminist Bricks: they are the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings.»¹

In her book Living a Feminist Life, Sara Ahmed describes how, in her writing, she makes space for feminist writers who, as she writes, ‹came before› her. She acknowledges a debt, particularly to feminists of colour, and works to centre the margins. Intriguingly, she employs an architectural metaphor, likening her research to a ‹dwelling› built by means of citations, or ‹Feminist Bricks›. Ahmed reminds us that we always make a choice when constructing research and writing by who (and in what order) we cite. She stresses that these choices have consequences beyond us; often others will live with the intellectual buildings we build as we pass them on. This trope resonated strongly with me as a feminist architectural historian; first because of the materiality evoked (researching, writing, quoting, building arguments conceived as spatial, perhaps even solid on which we can lean or dwell in securely), but also because it speaks about the agency and responsibility I have as a researcher and historian. I am privileged to have a choice how to reconstruct the past from the evidence I analyse.

Reading on through her book, I became fascinated by Ahmed's use of material and spatial metaphors. The brick occurs repeatedly in two incarnations: the 'feminist brick' as citation – a positive element in her (and my) line of argument – and the 'brick walls' giving the title to one of her chapters focusing on diversity work. Clearly negatively connoted, here the brick becomes a wall, a 'barrier': Ahmed tells us of the common "description of diversity work as a 'banging your head against a brick wall job'." There are bricks we can use to write feminist histories, to build feminist lives, to create inclusive institutional spaces – and there are those preventing us from doing exactly this. To me, this encapsulated some of the questions I have been asking of my subject area, histories of architecture before 1900: a combination of banging my head at the tight limits of what 'architectural history' has often been (or is) and the joy of building it anew, with others, with 'Feminist Bricks'.

With this article and in response to the call for this issue of *Kritische Berichte* by Silke Langenberg, Regine Hess, and Orkun Kasap, I want to explore some Feminist Bricks within my own research. My current 'dwelling' has a – perhaps catchy – name: WoWA. As Jane Rendell recently said, it is the female 'wow!', adding the Latin

ending -a: wow-a.³ The origins of the acronym are, however, bureaucratic: WoWA, or Women Writing Architecture 1700–1900, was born as a grant proposal to the European Research Council, all of which come with a memorable acronym. WoWA was its name long before all bricks in its formulation were assembled – sparking a moment of joy when the letter-bricks fell into place for a then still vague idea: to expand histories of architecture by exploring any writing by those identifying as women between 1700 and 1900 for traces of buildings, cities, or landscapes. While placed in architecture, the project avoided the term architect quite firmly – akin, perhaps, to Ahmed's no-white-men citational policy.⁴ In the following I explain WoWA's origins and initial aims as well as where the project stands now in 2023, halfway through its five-year funding period and after having placed quite a few bricks on top of each other. Not all these bricks, of WoWA and preceding it, stem from explicit feminist intentions and there are quite a few white men, but WoWA reassembles them with feminist mortar.

WoWA

WoWA is a collaborative research project examining the architectural agency women asserted through practices of writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁵ Within WoWA, architectural agency refers not to the practice of disegno – design and drawing, detached from dwelling or using – but instead to the influence, or the power, over architectural sense-making contained in the practice of rendering into words, for the public to read, of experiences within and opinions on the city and the building.6 WoWA also builds a bridge to thinking about the heritage of minorities – or rather, in our case, of marginalised groups such as women. We are dealing with marginalisation that happened twofold: at the time, historically, as well as in hindsight, in historiography. WoWA builds on the pivotal feminist protest that women have been erased from history as designers or draughtswomen. I have argued instead that other practices that were more accessible to women, such as writing and editing, have equally been ignored by or edited out of architectural histories.7 Contrary to still common assumptions, women did contribute to the formation, reception, and adaptation of architectures and spaces in the period considered here, but in different ways and modes for which WoWA seeks to propose suitable approaches and methodologies which intersect questions of gender with those of race, class, sexuality, or religion.

WoWA studies women's experiences of, and commentary on, architectures and landscapes between 1700 and 1900, focusing on a dispersed geography consisting of the southern cone of South America as well as German and English-speaking Europe. While architectural histories often focus on male-dominated processes of design and production, we take a new stance by unearthing women's contributions to the architectural sphere through practices of writing, translating, or editing. We are not looking for female architects or those designing spaces (it is self-evident that this is an important undertaking too, but it is a different approach). Instead, we argue that architectural agency is executed not only through design practices but also (and at times even more so) through the multiple ways spaces are ascribed with meaning through words in the process of dwelling, using, critiquing, travelling, or educating. We examine texts written by women – such as travelogues, manuals, histories, pamphlets – which for the major part have not yet been considered as sources for architectural histories. Our aim is to examine them collectively, as a significant force within spatial histories, not as singular exceptions to the rule.

WoWA Bricks

As bell hooks, a (feminist brick) of so many, has argued, there is agency within oppression, there are (spaces of radical openness) in the margin, chosen by the oppressed as sites of resistance. As she declares, these are not «safe places» (as all those currently fighting for their space, their lives, know too well) but they contain possibilities – as well as hope and power to teach us all, as historians.8 I do not claim that the women we examine all experienced the same degree of oppression. Many had privileges of different kinds; indeed, literacy was one. Still, I learn from bell hooks and take inspiration as well as courage from her writing. In Black Looks: Race and Representation, she declares «there is power in looking». 9 She does away with aesthetics being rooted in elite thought, arguing that it «is more than a philosophy or theory of art and beauty; it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming». She formulates «an aesthetic of existence, rooted in the idea that no degree of material lack could keep one from learning how to look at the world with a critical eye, how to recognize beauty, or how to use it as a force to enhance inner wellbeing», 10 So we look and listen, and give credit to all those who have looked with a critical eye in the past.

In my research before WoWA (and while formulating the first proposals for WoWA), I was mostly concerned with exploring architectural print cultures, primarily in nineteenth-century Britain, in order to understand the relationship between the building, the architect, and what has been called 'the public'. It was particularly Nancy Fraser's concept of 'counterpublics' – written as a response to Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere – which resonated with the questions I was asking. Contrary to Habermas, Fraser maintained that "nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics, and working class publics" emerged at the same time as Habermas's bourgeois publics in the eighteenth century (rather than only much later). Subaltern counterpublics, she wrote, "are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and need". Fraser thus highlighted disenfranchised groups, especially those discriminated against because of gender, class, race, religion or sexual orientation, crediting their discourses and voices.

In the context of my work on the British press in the 1830s and 40s, I realised that such counterpublics also existed for architectures, cities, and landscapes. At the same time, my work on visual and verbal representation, and the power I have previously argued both have on the ways in which western societies perceive, rationalize, feel, as well as design the built, helped me to formulate a specific project that went beyond tracing the dominant public sphere.15 We can break the (brick wall) around the bourgeois public sphere in retrospect, if we find those that did so at the time. This concern for publics and counterpublics results, for me, in a centring of the user rather than the architect: hence, it is WoWA's aim to expand our discipline's concern from the producer to the user of spaces. Histories of the built too often focus exclusively on the design process rather than the use of buildings and spaces, leading almost inevitably to a gendered bias in any period prior to (and often after) the mid 1900s. This is a circumstance that has its origins in the very phenomenon which this project seeks to, in methodological terms, dismantle: the hegemony of professionalisation. Here, architecture's public is meant as formed by a community having an interest in or connection to the built, including women and other disenfranchised groups. One of the forms in which this connection manifested itself, and which was most open to female participation in the geographies under consideration, was the written word. Recent projects and studies have pointed to the crucial relationship between the printed and the built in the formation of modernity. WoWA builds upon these initiatives to explore female publics of architecture in the chosen regions at a time of both progress and violence driven by industrialisation, revolution, nation building, colonisation, and decolonalisation.

As Mari Hvattum and I have shown in The Printed and the Built: Architecture, Print Culture, and Public Debate in the Nineteenth Century, texts and buildings of the period were tied up in a complex and reciprocal relationship within the public realm. The increase of architectural content in printed media – newspapers, books, pamphlets, and catalogues, not to mention magazines and journals – created a virtual public sphere in which the dramatic social, technological, and material changes occurring in the period could be absorbed and normalized. 17 The rise of the eighteenth-century bourgeois public sphere – and its counterpublics – is now most commonly located in semi-private spaces such as salons, literary societies, or coffeehouses, as well as printed sites such as journals, newspapers, or pamphlets. While many of these were exclusively male, others were not. Salons were mostly hosted by (writing) women - for instance, Elizabeth Montagu in mid eighteenth-century London, Rahel Varnhagen in Berlin around 1800, or Juana Manuela Gorriti in 1870s Lima. Female journalists edited and wrote for a range of periodicals – such as Eliza Haywood in The Female Spectator (Britain, 1744–1746), Sophie von La Roche in Pomona für Teutschlands Töchter (German States, 1783–1784), or Juana Paula Manso de Noronha in Album de Señoritas (Argentina, 1854). While, as we have argued in The Printed and the Built, newspapers helped to navigate the metropolis, female-authored domestic manuals, women's magazines, travelogues, and a host of other texts spread knowledge and criticism on and of spaces negotiated by women in both the private and the public realm. From kitchens, drawing rooms, and gardens, the sights visited by tourists to streets, squares, or factories, such spaces were described, discussed, and critiqued by women of diverse backgrounds and privilege, giving rise in turn to female publics and counterpublics in print, which have, largely, been ignored by architectural scholarship.

Scholarship on architectural publications has, like publication history in general, prospered in recent years. Yet, while ground-breaking, these projects have mostly considered texts of male authors, such as the Renaissance treatise, the public debates on new buildings in eighteenth-century France, or the world history of architecture. Twentieth-century architectural publications have lately been the subject of significant scholarship, but even in this, a focus on gender or marginalisation has been rare. It is in the field of periodical studies, that the most pioneering work has been carried out in this regard exploring women's writing and women's work.

WoWA contests that, despite an increasing male dominance of the architectural profession, women exercised architectural agency in the period, and they did so also through writing. Rather than looking for one-dimensional involvement of women in architecture – that is, as women following male practices – WoWA redefines architectural agency, listening intently to female-identifying voices to understand how they saw their role in documenting, critiquing, and shaping their built environments. We seek to expand the corpus of architectural historiography to female voices by showcasing texts that are as crucial to the discipline as the canon of overwhelmingly male

architects and architectural writers. This is a new approach within our discipline. WoWA stands on the Feminist Bricks of scholars who have, for instance, examined early female architects, home economics, women's involvement in the building trades, the role of the female patron or client, gendered spaces, or the role of the female body in architectural design. Recently, a number of collaborative projects have focused on the twentieth century and the ways in which women have been instrumental in shaping architectural practice. However, as Susana Torre wrote in 2000, in historical studies women are often «seen as extensions of the male gaze and [...] described as passive agents rather than engaged subjects» – a statement often still valid. As

Decoloniality provides WoWA with powerful tools to critique positions of power and dominant cultures both in Europe and in South America. We follow Ana Maria Léon's argument that "decoloniality [...] seeks to critique colonialism as an epistemic framework whose violence is present in all locations, even in colonizer regions". Hence, coloniality plays a role in all our case studies, whether Peruvian, German, Chilean, or British. As Mary Louise Pratt has posited, "to think from the Americas is also to think from the history of European expansionism, colonialism and indigeneity, invasion and dispossession, extractive capitalism and slavery, experienced from the arrival site or receiving end of these forces". WoWA thinks from the Americas, reading South America and Europe in their colonial contexts, explicit and implicit, tracing reverberations of the moments of transition when "cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other" generating what Mary Louise Pratt has defined as "contact zones".

As Felipe Hernández has argued, scholars of Latin American architecture have in the past often focused on linear Euro-American architectural narratives, at times ignoring more complex processes of transculturation. WoWA extends this problematic by basing its examination of South American sites and spaces on female experiences and critiques, thus constructing its (post-)colonial dimension in two ways: first, the project puts experiences of a group at its centre which was both colonised (as marginalised, at times oppressed) and coloniser (as oppressing and marginalising): predominantly white women privileged at least by their literacy. Second, WoWA's geography – German-speaking Europe, Chile, Peru, Britain, and Argentina – is purposefully assembled in a way that neither of the examined countries was in an official imperial or colonial relationship with one another, yet they were tightly entangled by economic colonialism and extractive capitalism, as well as Eurocentric educational projects and cultural exchanges creating conditions which are often ongoing today. WoWA builds on an awareness of (post-)colonial complexities, violent relationships, and persisting coloniality by emphasising its comparative element, between three languages, between travellers and locals, between coloniser and colonised, in a wide sense of these terms. While writing as a practice is, for some, a practice of resistance, it is also one of colonisation and oppression, which means that we cannot use WoWA to meaningfully examine Indigenous agencies. It is our hope that some elements of the project will, in the future, contribute to formulate other approaches that make visible knowledges and forms of agencies for those racialised and made subaltern by the coloniser.

While there are significant studies on the historical roles played by women in Latin America, there is little work done on architectural discourses within the region, as opposed to in its link to Europe and, later, North America.²⁷ WoWA aims to

connect sources stemming from different parts of the world, i.e. from what are often considered centre and periphery in the narration of architectural history. Challenging linear Euro-American architectural narratives of styles imported to the supposed new world and as scholarship on knowledge transfers between Latin America and Europe in the field of architecture is mainly dominated by specific time periods – such as pre-, post-, and colonial, Beaux Arts and Modernism – the proposed period between 1700 and 1900 opens an innovative dimension of cross-timing in contrast to canonical histories.

WoWA Dwelling

WoWA's dwelling is beginning to emerge in the work of its three team members: Sol Pérez Martínez (postdoc), Elena Rieger (PhD), and myself. It consists of local, concise structures growing out of a wider landscape of women writing architecture between 1700 and 1900. Operating in three languages – English, Spanish, and German – we employ a two-stage process, micro and macro, as well as three key methodological approaches, focusing in turn on experience recorded through language, the geographies of writing, as well as the mapping of everyday commentary with the canon of architecture. On the macro level, we focus on identifying large numbers of texts written by women in our period and geography, which we deem

as relevant for histories of architectures, cities, and landscapes. With the micro approach, we construct local in-depth case studies tracing single women or groups of women and their publications. Close reading of this smaller sample will enable detailed linguistic analysis of the ways in which authors discuss architecture as well as exhaustive biographical investigations studying their networks both local and global.

My own research is located across WoWA's geographies and focuses on three genres: travel writing, historiography, and advice literature. My aim is to read these texts as spatial critiques, revealing the influence their authors wielded over spatial practices and norms. Reading between continents and in the colonial contexts of the period, I complicate their gender with their class, race, and colonial privileges, while reframing their work as equally important as that of male architectural writers and designers. I have studied the eighteenth-century journalist and novelist Sophie von La Roche, who critically described public spaces and shaped women's behaviour in it, but also preferred to cite female authors (her Feminist Bricks).28 Sol Pérez Martínez's postdoc project examines women's writings in Chile, Perú, and Argentina, arguing that they (made space) for themselves and other women in the late colonial and early republican period,



despite their political and social limitations. By uncovering and analysing women's writings on three urban sites – the street, the convent and the school – she makes women's participation visible in constructing, understanding and critiquing the built environment. One of her case studies is the 19th-century Chilean poet Rosa Araneda, who shaped the construction of Santiago, the capital of the new Chilean republic.²⁹ Elena Rieger's doctoral project focuses on German-speaking Europe. She exploits the spatial dimension of the German term Frauenzimmer which denotes both a women's room, but also a woman as a person. Focusing on woman's physical presence in space, she explores how the situated writings of five women help to challenge dominant narratives which have historically excluded and marginalised certain groups.³⁰ Doing this work, we have found that we must continuously shed preconceptions and some of our academic strategies to make visible previously ignored spatial agency within the texts we read. Hence, Sol Pérez Martínez and I have developed the Reading-with Guide. Tried and tested through four workshops in Switzerland and Chile as well as a master's and a PhD seminar, «Reading-with is a feminist, immersive, and collaborative method, consisting of a scripted set of reading layers that enables participants to read both with each other and with marginalised authors, exploring side-lined or hidden experiences of the built environment'.31



Posters for WoWA Workshops in 2022–2023, designed by Sol Pérez Martínez

(feminist straw)

Pondering her own trope of the feminist brick, Sara Ahmed goes on to propose deminist straw: lighter materials that, when put together, still create a shelter but a shelter that leaves you more vulnerable'. And perhaps this is the most important point about citations and sources – we should not use them to prop us up, to build walls by claiming the universal that cannot be challenged by future researchers and readers. Hence, deminist straw helps resolve the good drick / bad drick wall binary. Easier put up, easier repaired or expanded, relying on a community for shelter – and higher permeability to look, with bell hooks, and to listen, as we called for in our 2023 conference Listening In: «Who do we listen to when we write histories of architectures, cities, and landscapes? How many women authors can we find among our sources? How many of them are cited by those whose research we read?»

Notes

- 1 Sara Ahmed: Living a Feminist Life, Duke University Press, Durham 2016, p. 16.
- 2 Ibid., p. 135.
- **3** Verbal comment by Jane Rendell at Listening In: Conversations on Architectures, Citis and Landscapes, international conference, ETH Zurich, 13–15 September 2023.
- 4 Ahmed 2016 (as Note 1), p. 15.
- **5** Again, I rely on Ahmed: «What do I mean by women here? I am referring to all those who travel under the sign women.» Ahmed 2016 (as Note 1), p. 14.
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- **16** The Printed and the Built (AHO Oslo 2014–2018); PriArc Printing the Past: Architecture, Print Culture, and Uses of the Past in Modern Europe (2016–2019).
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- 19 E.g. Beatriz Colomina/Craig Buckley (eds.): Clip, Stamp, Fold. The Radical Architecture of Little Magazines, 196X to 197X, New York 2010; Alexis Sornin/Helene Janniere/France Vanlaethem (eds.): Architectural Periodicals in the 1960s and 1970s. Towards a Factual, Intellectual and Material History, First, IRHA/ABC Art Books Canada 2008.
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