Gender Studies in Architecture

An Honors Thesis

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Throughout history, there have been distinct differences between the male and female genders. Deriving mainly from differences in body structures, the world has developed around such distinctions. While the male image has traditionally represented strength and dominance, the female image was frequently stereotyped as a softer, more nurturing figure. These broad generalizations have evolved throughout time, incorporating many alternative views.

In comparing previous gender structures with present day alternatives, one clearly witnesses the evolution of both the male and female figures. These evolutions of gender roles carry over into many realms of society today, including the built environment. By incorporating these evolutions into architecture, one could successfully design a space that celebrates the distinctions between these adapted genders.
The goal of designing such a project, one celebrating the evolution of societal conceptions of gender roles, is to take gender progression into consideration when creating a specific environment. By using research done on this topic, one is able to create a well-planned environment that is representative of such findings.
Thesis Topic: Issues and Positions

What does it mean to be female?

What is the essence of 'femaleness'?

What traits would a 'female building' exhibit?

In order to explore these topics, one must first explore what tendencies distinguish the female identity from the male identity. Though this task may seem elementary at first glance, one soon discovers that this topic is quite subjective, depending largely on one's personal interpretations and experiences.
In researching the essence of today's woman, the exploration of the differences between women today and women of previous generations is vital. Women today are less satisfied defining themselves based upon one single component. Where many women of previous generations felt content in describing themselves solely as mothers or housewives, larger numbers of women today proudly choose to take on many roles. This ability to wear many hats is largely due to the evolution of societal views, morphing the traditional roles of men and women together, forming less rigid patterns in which both men and women may individually interpret.
Thesis Project: Description

To utilize studies on female angles of architecture, a project was needed which allowed for flexibility in its overall scheme. This project would be designed from a woman's view of the female figure in society today.

In order to create space which displays the attributes of today's women in society, a site was chosen that is conducive to open-mindedness, diversity, and exploration.

With students from the United States and over 130 foreign countries, Florida International University has a very diverse student body. The eclectic identity of FIU promotes both open-mindedness and acceptance throughout the campus.
In addition to its diverse student population, FIU also has a notable Women's Studies program, led by Dr. Suzanna Rose. Established in 1982, this department has evolved into a multifaceted foundation. Complete with classes, programs, scholarships, mentor programs, and lectures, the program has developed its own campus identity.

Currently located in the student center, Graham Center, the department is long overdue for a separate facility. This new environment will incorporate the existing features with a new emphasis on design features, establishing a sense of space and comfort for the use of both women and men.

As stated in the FIU's Women's Studies Mission Statement,

“The Women’s Center at FIU was established to provide women with programs and services related to their intellectual, professional, social, and emotional growth. The Women’s Center collaborates and coordinates with other University departments to meet the needs, and enhance the lives, of the varied female population on campus. We educate and advocate for systematic changes that will improve the lives of women and men.”
The site was chosen for its central location within the FIU campus. Located adjacent to the university's main quad, students and visitors are able to easily travel between the major gathering areas on campus. Not only is the Women's Center near the existing campus focal points, but each 'arm' of the center reaches out to other key components of campus, including sports facilities, Green Library, open spaces, and educational buildings. By extending out in many directions, the facility places equal importance on all components of its surroundings, removing any sense of hierarchy.
In beginning the design form, the major concepts took main precedence, incorporating the ideas of outreach, growth, and centrality. The goal of the building was to achieve an overall sense of 'femaleness,' thus tying together the components found during exploration of the question,

"What traits would a female building exhibit?"

Early study models and sketches explored methods and elements which provoked feelings of welcoming and embracing. Outstretched 'arms' were modeled by sloping wings of the building, which also serve to reach across and create senses of anchor and strength.

The use of various materials expressed the diversity of today's women. These individual elements pull together in one central area to exhibit the coming together of all identities possible, while also forming one solid individual component.
"What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine."

- Susan Sontag

Against Interpretation
ARCADES ENTRY
BLURRING ENTRY POINTS
PORTHOLE MANY BUILDING MATERIALS
LANDSCAPE OPPORTUNITIES
ORGANIC SHAPE

WARMTH, WELCOME, FLEXIBILITY

CONTACT ZONE
POSITIVE RESULT
CENTRALITY
GROWTH
In studying previous buildings which expressed feelings of masculinity and regiment, one witnesses how the essence of a 'male building' is expressed. For example, the Bauhaus, created in 1919 in Weimar, Germany, sought to integrate art and economics, while adding an element of engineering to art. Thus, this institution developed an overall feeling of controlled order. The Citadel Military Academy, created in 1829 in Charleston, South Carolina, uses military tactics in retaining a sense of similarity among cadets. In institutions such as these, lack of diversity and a commitment to order allows these facilities to emit strong senses of masculinity.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Looking back at the process of defining what it means to be a woman today, I feel that it has been an enlightening experience. Not only have I traced the path of progress for women in society, but I have also pondered the methods to express such an evolution through design. Defining main concepts which describe the spirit of today's women was the first and most important step in the design process. It is these components which outline the path to answering the question, 'Who is today's woman?'

As an emerging professional woman, I chose Women's Studies for my senior architecture thesis because it is something that I feel truly passionate about. I feel that with each generation, gender roles within society morph and change, allowing for increased freedom for personal interpretation.

I feel quite fortunate to be part of a generation in which it is possible for both women and men to come together for the well-being of humanity. With the deletion of gender boundaries, one is able to explore any avenue of life without feeling displaced.

I have truly enjoyed the topic of Gender Studies in Architecture. I feel that I reached my goal of capturing the essence of what it means to me to be a woman today, while also using this knowledge to design a space which celebrates the evolution of society's gender roles. After all, it is not simply the evolution of women's roles in today's society, but rather the evolution of society as a whole identity striving for improvement and opportunities for future generations.