

# Architecture For Feminism?: The Design Of The Women's Library, London

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the recently opened the Women's Library in London, England, designed by Wright & Wright Architects. It argues that the design of the building is implicitly feminist through its site, deference to history, the absence of spatial hierarchies, its environmental position, and its relationship to millennial architecture in London.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore la "Women's Library," à Londres, en Angleterre, conçue par Wright & Wright Architects. Il discute que la conception de l'édifice est implicitement féministe dans toute sa construction, l'absence d'hierarchie spatiale, sa position environnementale, et sa relation avec l'architecture londonienne millénaire.

The Women's Library in London, England, has splendid new quarters (See Appendix). Housed behind the dirty brick façade of a mid-19th-century wash house in the city's East End, the refurbished library boasts six storeys of state-of-the-art archives, a grand exhibition gallery, and a double-height reading room. Opened in 2002, the library's crisp, red-brick and copper form steps back from a gentle bend in narrow Old Castle Street, highlighting seven beautiful arched openings in the façade of the former wash house. Inside, the building is a complex series of layers and filters, becoming increasingly intimate in scale with distance from the entry.

This new building marks a dramatic shift in the architectural evolution of the institution. Its predecessor, called the Fawcett Library (whose 75th anniversary was celebrated at the opening of the new building), was housed in the basement of Calcutta House, a factory-inspired university edifice directly to the south of the new building (then part of the City of London Polytechnic). To access this library, readers entered the building across Old Castle Street, ascended to and crossed a rickety overhead bridge, and then descended to a cramped basement. Because of this mazelike access and subterranean location, I felt the Fawcett Library was my own, secret library - almost an underground paradise - when I spent some time there as a researcher in the late 1980s.

Despite its relative invisibility as a cultural resource, the collections of the Fawcett-now-Women's Library are outstanding, ranging from early twentieth-century suffrage banners designed and created by artist-based suffrage organisations ([http://vads.ahds.ac.uk/vads\\_catalogue/FSB.html](http://vads.ahds.ac.uk/vads_catalogue/FSB.html)) to a first edition of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The library's treasures even include *The Lawes Resolutions of Women's Rights of 1632*, reputedly the first book in English on women's rights. While these

rare artefacts and volumes are important, I revelled in the accessible, open stacks of the Fawcett Library, a shocking contrast to the inaccessible collections of women's titles at the more famous British Library and Victoria & Albert Museum across town, which prohibit browsing.

The Women's Library is clearly a significant and attractive place for feminist scholars, but is the building itself feminist? Does feminist architecture stem from the politics of its designers? Is architectural form inherently feminist? Do architects (men or women) design differently for women patrons and users? And what sort of architecture might be inspired by texts about the history of women? "It's all in the number of loos [washrooms]," responds Glasgow-trained architect Clare Wright with a smile.<sup>1</sup> Wright is a founding partner in the small, London-based firm Wright & Wright, a wife-and-husband partnership appointed by the library in 1995. Subscribing to the famous modernist adage "form follows function," Wright claims that "the building's brief determined our approach to the site." But the functional requirements went far beyond a list of rooms, calling for "a building with dignity, reflecting the national significance of the collections, and suggested that the new library should "feel permanent." Given the institution's earliest quarters, even before its "secret" home in the basement next door, were a converted pub in Westminster, this urge for permanence in the new building is not surprising. Over four million pounds from the Heritage Lottery helped too.

Don't get me wrong. I appreciate any public building with adequate toilet facilities for women. But the more profound relationship of the building *vis-à-vis* women users is that of the library's architectural form to feminism. I argue in this paper that the library's feminist stance is at least five-fold, legible in its connection to the site, its deference to history, the absence of spatial hierarchies, its environmental stance, and perhaps most importantly, its

relationship to contemporary architecture in London. Although feminist critics of architecture articulated coherent ways of understanding the built environment as long ago as the 1980s, there is still no single, agreed-upon method of analysis (Boys 1984; Buckley 1986; Hughes 1996). The Women's Library, in particular, is a good illustration of how to define a building, artefact, or practice in relation to feminist discourse. Unlike Wright, I believe that in the case of the Women's Library, form follows feminism, not function. It even points to tensions and issues in contemporary feminist discourse that may be illegible in other media.

The library is also an important case study because there are surprisingly few purpose-built, public buildings designed for women. The commission also points to ongoing issues for feminists as professional architects and researchers. Among the pioneering groups to first question women's contribution to the profession was Matrix, a feminist design group founded about 1980. Matrix criticized the typical relationship of architects and users through an exhibition called *Home Truths* and a book, *Making Space: Women and the Man Made Environment*, published in 1984. At about the same time, a number of important academic works appeared, underlining, like Matrix, how poorly the built world accommodates women's needs. The most significant of these books, by Dolores Hayden (1981) and Gwendolyn Wright (1980), engaged historical examples as evidence, rather than challenging contemporary architects to re-think their practices. They, too, focused on houses.

How does a building articulate a position on women's history? Both the location of the site within London and the ghost of the Victorian wash house have direct links to women's history. Wright believes her firm got the job, in fact, because of their willingness to conserve sections of the old wash house, a place of women's work. East End London is the traditional home of the city's poor, working-class, and immigrant populations. It is also a significant area of feminist and labour activity. C.H. Townsend's Whitechapel Art Gallery, built in 1896-97, is a superb example of the English Arts and Crafts movement, which highlighted the work of women artists. It is just a few blocks away from the new library; even closer is Toynbee Hall, a settlement house designed by Elijah Hoole in 1885, where poor women acquired survival skills (and which inspired North American settlements like Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago [Lefkowitz Horowitz, 1983-84]). And Old Castle Street was the location of the first Board School, a building type intended to ensure public education for all of London's boys and girls (Robson 1972; Weiner 1994, 56).<sup>2</sup>

Women have been brutalized there too. Bedlam Hospital, an institution where insane men and women were flogged and chained, once occupied the site of the current Liverpool Street Station. Jack the Ripper's horrific murders of at least six women were committed in East End London

in 1888.<sup>3</sup>

The wash house, like the art gallery, reform house, and even insane asylum, was a significant building type for women. In this and many other instances, wash houses were constructed within public baths (Sheard 2000). It was here that working-class families gained access to hot and cold running water, to clean both their bodies and their clothing in an era in which cleanliness was thought directly linked to health. Wash houses typically occupied one third to half of the ground floor of bath-wash house combination buildings, and almost always had an entrance completely separate from the baths. Whereas baths had two entries for men and women, wash houses had one: for women. Washing compartments and drying horses occupied the largest room in the establishment, while ironing and mangling took up a room half that size. Often the only link between the two sections of the building's laundry and bathing rooms was through the women's section of the baths. From a twenty-first century perspective, perhaps its most important attribute is that the wash house included daycare facilities, allowing women to focus on washing, drying, and ironing. These activities are legible in Alfred Cross, *Public Baths and Wash-houses* (1906), in which the architect-author reproduces 144 plans of baths.

The design of the Women's Library acknowledges and even embraces this history of serving East-End women. The wall of the wash house literally wraps the innards of the new institution. And the new building defers to the older one in section, stepping back (like a wedding cake) from the historic façade (fig. 2). Inside the arches of the wash house elevation is the library café, located directly above the new building's entry.

The overall plan of the building also exemplifies feminist characteristics. Most significant in this regard is the absence of spatial hierarchies, paralleling the way feminist texts are often authored collaboratively. Most contemporary public buildings are organized around large public areas from which smaller spaces lead. Since the 1980s, many hotels, libraries, museums, shopping centres and even airports have employed a monumental atrium as the entry in order to facilitate circulation and, some would argue, provide an atmosphere of consumption. The atrium is always legible in the cross-section of the building. In the Women's Library, however, even the largest spaces (the reading room and exhibition gallery) are rather intimate, and only accessible by moving through a complex series of horizontal and vertical filters, including a small lobby and stairs and beginning with heavy sliding steel gridded doors.

In general terms, the building is ordered by two structural cores which run along the east and west sides of the library, each housing a set of stairs. On the ground floor, these two cores frame the exhibition gallery, which itself surrounds a polygonal, stone-clad seminar room (figs. 3 and 4). This room floats like an island in the gallery space; even its roof offers a second interior perspective on the exhibition, as a high-rise multi-purpose, interior perch.

On the north side of the building is a long and narrow courtyard garden, a tiny sliver of air and light in a congested and polluted urban realm. This is very different and much more complicated than the design of most public buildings, which separate big circulation spaces from smaller private areas.

What is particularly distinctive about these spaces in the new library is that they depend on each other to function. The exhibition gallery functions as a foyer for the seminar room; the courtyard as a spillover space for the gallery; the suspended multi-purpose space is literally supported by the seminar room. Library carrels nestled in the stacks of the second floor reading room cantilever into the upper reaches of the exhibition gallery. Visitors to the gallery can thus catch a glimpse of scholars hard at work, producing culture, rather than just consuming it. This extensive transparency of the working areas does not stem from a need for surveillance as much as it underlines the interdependent and interlocking aspects of the building's program or brief.

The more secluded and scholarly spaces of the Women's Library are in the upper levels of the new building (fig. 5). Whereas the barrel-vaulted main reading area and stacks consume most of the second floor, the all-important computer area and periodicals room are clad in copper and subtly step out to the street, absorbing the difference in setback between the wash-house wall and the university building to its south. Particularly interesting in this copper-clad section of the library is the corner window, carefully cut to frame a spectacular view of Nicholas Hawksmoor's sumptuous Christ Church of 1714-29, a few blocks to the north. Like the conservation of the wash house wall, this is another significant gesture to history.

Places to meet are everywhere apparent, especially in the reading room, again privileging the collective over the individual. Above the central table is the room's *pièce de résistance*, a huge gold and silver wall clock specially commissioned from jeweller Anna Gordon. The clock was Gordon's first large-scale commission. "I take my inspiration from architecture and simple repeated forms," says Gordon.<sup>4</sup> She created small, abstract metal pieces for the reading room door, too, and one of several pieces on women's history that adorn the main stair. In this way, the entire building functions as a showcase for women's diverse roles as subjects of history, artists, interpreters, and producers. Women are active agents in this library. This role is radically different from the one of women situated in 19th-century libraries. There they were segregated and displayed in passive postures, reading light literature (Van Slyck 1996).

The most significant meeting place of the library, due to its stacked configuration, is probably the stairs. And if I had to find something to criticize about the design of the Women's Library it would be the width of these stairs. While in plan the parallel duo of structural cores makes sense, in reality one is a fire stair while the other serves the

entire building. When the library closes, when a large meeting breaks up, or any other time when a stair is likely to be full of users, the main stair is far too narrow.

The library's respect for local history and the absence of spatial hierarchies, then, are two characteristics of the building that, while having a material, tangible quality, reflect strands of feminist thought. The traces of working women's agency and labour are reflected in the architecture. As for the absence of spatial hierarchies, many feminist projects (especially in the 1970s) explored forms that might offer an alternative to patriarchal models, such as the phallic symbolism of the skyscraper. The challenge for all critics of architecture, feminist or not, is how to connect physical form and symbolic meaning without invoking causality or inevitability. But at the same time, it is precisely this link that makes architecture potentially about more than itself.

A third particularly feminist feature of the design of the Women's Library is its subversion of contemporary trends in architecture, where size matters. The much-publicized projects constructed for the millennium and Queen Elizabeth's Jubilee two years later - the Great Court of the British Museum, the Tate Modern, various stations of the extended Jubilee Line on the London Underground, the new British Library - are all big, muscular, taut-skinned structures that scream "look at me." All these projects have exposed structures. Both the small scale and the thick walls of the Women's Library are radically different from mainstream design. Wright explains that most of her firm's buildings have thick walls. "Thick, heavy walls are more interesting to us," she says, pointing out that she is intrigued by how glass sits within the thickness of the wall, or how a door is hung.

The thick walls of the Women's Library also make sense for environmental reasons, since they serve as thermal mass. And a third purpose they serve is structural, since the archives actually sit within the external walls of the building. The walls of the archives, indeed, consist of concrete beams spanning between the two structural cores. This allows for a dramatic shaft of light into the back of the exhibition gallery, where the tiny carrels are suspended from the stacks. Most spaces, too, are naturally ventilated, which is highly unusual for a library. The engineers estimate that this may reduce the energy consumption of the archives by 80% (Slessor 2002).

A comparison to the new British Library designed by Sir Colin St. John Wilson, which opened in 1998 (after fourteen years of construction) next to St. Pancras rail station, is compelling. Big is the operative word, as the British Library is among the largest public buildings constructed in the UK in the twentieth century, with eleven reading rooms, four deep basements housing more than two hundred miles of shelving, offices for more than one thousand staff members. Its floor area exceeds 1.2 million square feet. Regardless of its colossal size, the institution's relationship to its site differs substantially from that of the

Women's Library. While the Women's Library occupies a constricted site, relieved only by the sliver-like courtyard on the north side, the British Library (fig. 6) literally spills out onto Euston Road. Its front, an enormous piazza, invites Londoners to enter and read. Even inside the main entrance, a generous lobby and series of gentle stairs beckon visitors up and up and up, towards the King's Library. This is a six-storey glass-walled tower at the heart of the building, housing 65,000 volumes collected by King George III. By contrast, the Women's Library has no such heart and does little to invite passersby to enter. The doors at the Women's Library are sliding steel bars; the stairs are steep; and the courtyard is private and exclusive, rather than a tool of public outreach. This relatively inhospitable relationship to the street may derive from three situations: the unpredictable neighbourhood, the tough security requirements for obtaining heritage lottery money, and the associated mandate to protect women's history.

Are there other buildings like it? Historically, Sophia Hayden's Women's Building at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893 was highly visible. The National Museum of Women in the Arts, in Washington, DC, the only museum in the world dedicated exclusively to recognizing the contributions of women artists, is the closest place in programmatic terms to the Women's Library. The Schlesinger Library, established at Radcliffe College (now the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University) holds the papers, books, and memorabilia documenting American women's political and reform work after 1920. In Canada, significant buildings for women are mostly university colleges, hospitals, or recreational facilities. In terms of design, most of these, certainly schools and nurses' residences, intentionally look like big houses (Adams 1994). Women architects constitute only about twenty percent of the professions in Canada (Adams and Tancred 2000). Sadly, there is no major purpose-built cultural institution dedicated to the art or history of Canadian women.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Interview with Clare Wright, 6 November 2002. Further quotes from Wright are from this interview. According to Wright, the facilities in The Women's Library for disabled users count as men's washrooms, allowing an unusually generous number of toilets for women.
2. Personal communication from Deborah Weiner, 25 November 2002, confirming that the location of the first Board school was on Old Castle Street.
3. <http://www.jack-the-ripper-walk.co.uk/walk.htm>
4. Personal communication from Anna Gordon, November 25, 2002.

Such a building was once wished-for in England. Muf, a collaborative firm of artists and architects founded in 1994, designed a never-built Museum of Women's Art as part of a proposal for lottery funding for King's Cross in London, completed in 1994. As a project, it perhaps comes closest to the Women's Library in terms of program. Unlike Wright & Wright's apolitical, form-follows-function position on design, Muf's intentions for the proposed museum were clearly directed towards the intersection of form, intent and political agenda (Ainley 2001). Their plan for the institution was to "expose and exceed the paradox of opening up a hidden canon of women's work only to enclose it again in another hermetic institution" (Ainley 2001, 108).

What is fascinating is the resemblance of Muf's museum to Wright & Wright's library. Muf's model shows carefully designed sectional links between certain spaces in the museum, as well as between the museum and the neighbourhood, in order to underline the conditions that have marginalized women. Spatially, that is, the building was to remain "open to interference." Toilets were important in this project too. What Muf's little-published project shows, I would argue, is that the five ways in which the Women's Library relates to feminism is not an isolated occurrence in England's contemporary architecture. The library's connection to its site, its deference to history, its absence of spatial hierarchies, its environmental stance, and even its stance *vis-à-vis* contemporary architecture in London distinguish it as feminist architecture.

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## APPENDIX

### ILLUSTRATIONS:

1. This general view of the Women's Library shows the preserved façade of the 1846 wash house. Note how the two structural cores are legible from the street. The library *per se* is the tripartite, copper-clad section, located just above the wash house wall. Photograph by Peter Cook/View, Courtesy of Wright & Wright.
2. The design of the Women's Library acknowledges and embraces its history of serving East-End women. This cross section looking south shows how the wall of the wash house literally wraps the new institution. And the new building defers to the older one in section, stepping back (like a wedding cake) from the historic façade. Inside the arches of the wash house elevation is the library café, located directly above the new building's entry. Courtesy of Wright & Wright.
3. The overall organization is determined by two structural cores which run along the east and west sides of the library, each housing a set of stairs. On the ground floor, these two cores frame the exhibition gallery, which itself surrounds a polygonal, stone-clad seminar room. Courtesy of Wright & Wright.
4. Wright & Wright's sectional perspective shows how the seminar room floats like an island in the gallery space. Its roof offers a second perspective on the exhibition, as a high-rise multi-purpose perch, accessible via an interior bridge. Cantilevered study carrels, shown here on the left-center of the drawing, offer a third way to view the gallery. Note the

generous skylight illuminating both the carrels and the exhibition below. Courtesy of Wright & Wright.

5. Whereas the barrel-vaulted main reading area and stacks consume most of the second floor, the all-important computer area and periodicals room are clad in copper and subtly step out to the street, absorbing the difference in setback between the wash-house wall and the university building to its south. Here a corner window has been carefully cut to frame Christ Church. This is another significant gesture to history. Courtesy of Wright & Wright.

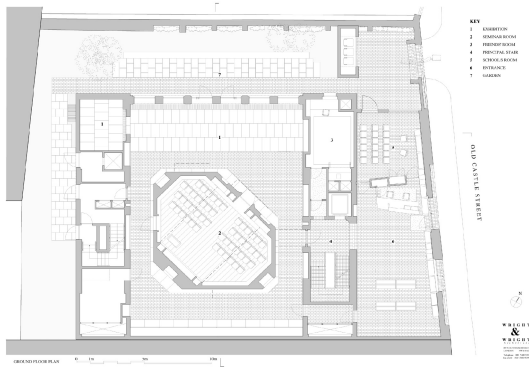
6. The generous courtyard of the British Library provides a stark contrast to the minimal setback and prison-like entry of the Women's Library. Its design, typical of contemporary museum and library architecture, is based on a hierarchy of spaces. The Women's Library is organized differently, with no such hierarchy.



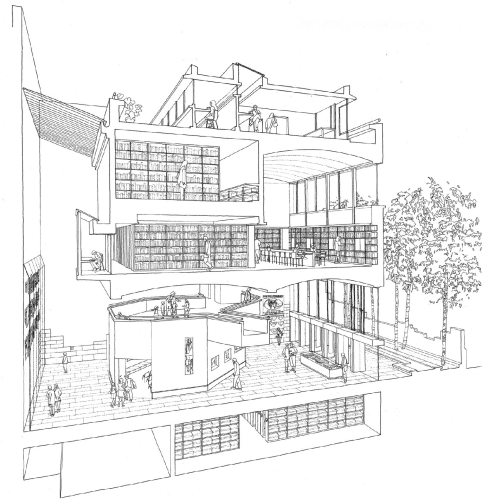
**Figure 1**  
© Peter Cook/ VIEW



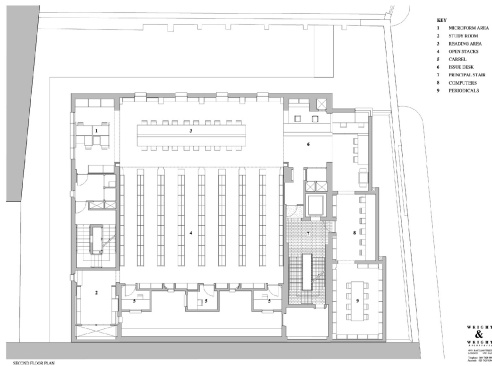
**Figure 2**  
Courtesy Wright & Wright.



**Figure 3**  
Courtesy Wright & Wright.



**Figure 4**  
Courtesy Wright & Wright.



**Figure 5**  
Courtesy Wright & Wright.



**Figure 6**  
By permission of the British Library- British Library Piazza.