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**Space-Praxis:
Towards a Feminist Politics of Design**

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B.S. Stanford University, 2017

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the Yale School of Architecture in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of: Master of Environmental Design

Yale University
May 2021

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Abstract

Outside of the academy and professionalized practice, design has long been central to the production of feminist, political projects. Taking what I have termed space-praxis as its central analytic, this project explores a suite of feminist interventions into the built environment—ranging from the late 1960s to present day. Formulated in response to Michel de Certeau’s theory of spatial practices, space praxis collapses formerly bifurcated definitions of ‘tactic’/‘strategy’ and ‘theory’/‘practice.’ It gestures towards those unruly, situated undertakings that are embedded in an ever-evolving, liberative politics. In turning outwards, away from the so-called masters of architecture, this thesis orients itself toward everyday practitioners who are grounded in the environment-worlds they seek to reorganize and re-imagine. Though few of the space-practitioners discussed in this work would consider themselves architects, their work at the margin of design meaningfully expands contemporary definitions of architecture. Indeed, they exemplify the ways in which architecture could be retooled as a mode of activist engagement. The diverse array of spaces investigated include a handful of women’s centers in New York City, Cambridge, MA, and Los Angeles; the first feminist self-help gynecology clinic; an empty house in Oakland that was reclaimed by a group of Black mothers in 2019; and a series of pop-up block parties in Chicago.

While this document in no way operates as an encyclopedia of feminist space-praxes, it highlights an array of such projects held together by their mutual investment in building feminist commons and infrastructures of care. In each project, survival is understood as a material practice, contingent on the affective relationship between bodies, space, and technologies. Though the direct object of each project’s intervention varies—from the clinic, to the house, to the neighborhood—each suggests alternative ways of living, surviving, and designing outside of the built environment’s hetero-patriarchal scripts.

Table of Contents

Introduction. Space-Praxis.....	3
Chapter 1. The Women’s Buildings: Designing Multidimensional Commons.....	23
Chapter 2. Self-Help Space: The (Un)Making of Clinical Space at the Feminist Women's Health Centers.....	65
Chapter 3. Black Feminist Repair: Moms for Housing, Mothers/Men Against Senseless Killings, and Abolitionist Space-Praxis.....	101
Conclusion. Feminist Failure.....	140
Bibliography.....	152
Appendix.....	163

Introduction

Space-Praxis

A group of homeless and marginally housed mothers squat in a house owned by a real estate speculation company in West Oakland. A woman sits on an intersection in Chicago that has been plagued by gun violence, serving hot dogs to local residents and dramatically reducing homicide rates over the course of a few years. In Cambridge, a collection of socialist feminists take over the Harvard Technology Workshop, claiming it as a women's center. Another group transforms an Oakland church into a cafeteria, serving breakfast to impoverished children. Later that day, one of those kids who is battling sickle cell anemia goes to a public park where she is met by the same women, who have taught themselves to diagnose and mitigate her disease. In Los Angeles, a group of women assemble a do-it-yourself (DIY) abortion kit from parts found in grocery stores and a local school supplies retailer. They read literature hung on the wall of a feminist clinic that guides them as they complete a safe abortion for a friend. In another L.A. neighborhood, a group of feminist artists purchase and renovate a building, transforming it into a hybrid school, gallery space, and meeting place for local activists. Across the country, a group of transgender activists scrape together enough cash to rent a Manhattan apartment where they can shelter, feed, and care for trans and gender-nonconforming youth.

These moments in time and space, which span from the late 1960s to present day, and from coast to coast of the United States, are brought together in this thesis as examples of women-led movements that have made the transformation of the built environment a focal point of their activism. Unlike traditional architectural projects—which are dictated by blueprints and construction phasing, and realized by hierarchically stratified workers—the projects explored herein are situated, adaptive, and sometimes unruly undertakings. They each embody an ethos of self-determination, radical collectivity, and care, and as such they are meaningful expressions of what I am calling an intersectional, feminist politics of design. Though the women, mothers, trans activists, and allies who have led these projects rarely considered themselves architects or spatial practitioners, their work at the margin of design meaningfully expands contemporary definitions of architecture. Indeed, these individuals and collectives exemplify the ways in which architecture—and spatial practice at large—might be retooled as an activist mode of engaging with the world.

In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, philosopher Michel de Certeau provides a definition for his concept of spatial practice that will prove central for this thesis. Spatial practices, de Certeau claims, are everyday acts of appropriation which subvert and repurpose commodities and commodified space. These practices are necessarily “tricky and stubborn procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised.”¹ Crucially, spatial practices are situated within dominant systems; they operate not through isolation from hegemonic, institutional scripts, but rather by becoming intimate with them, resisting by performing them

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 96.

otherwise. The anti-disciplinarian nature of such practices is captured in de Certeau's discussion of Charlie Chaplin, whose spatial practice manifested through the peculiar handling of his cane: rather than performing its conscripted, commercial use, as a bodily support, Chaplin "multiplies the possibilities of his cane" by transforming it into an instrument of comedic communication.² Here, the environment around Chaplin is just as critical to his practice as the cane—it provides a theater for his performance, a sphere of action that inspires acts of improvisation and subversion. Similarly, the stage of the city becomes the site for spatial practices. Pedestrians appropriate the topographical system of the city by moving across its grid in myriad ways, corrupting its formulaic design.

For feminist designers, historians, and theorists alike, de Certeau's notion of spatial practices has been foundational to reconceptualizing architecture as more than just a professionalized field of work. As feminist architectural historian and theorist Jane Rendell states, de Certeau's writing on spatial practice

has produced an understanding of practice as a process which occurs not only through design of buildings but also through the activities of using, occupying and experiencing them, and through the various modes of writing and imaging used to describe, analyse and interrogate space.³

Spatial practices, as Rendell states, are not reserved for those with a degree in architecture. Instead, they are insinuated in everyday actions—dwelling, cooking, shopping—as well as in artistic, performative activities.

Yet, if we follow de Certeau's provocations faithfully, which I will advise against, not all spatial practices are of a piece. In defining the contours of spatial practice, he

² Ibid.

³ Jane Rendell, "Only resist: a feminist approach to critical spatial practice," *Architectural Review*, February 10, 2018.

splits the overarching category into two distinct “ways of operating”: through the strategy, a place-based practice used to reinforce the existing spatial order, and the tactic, a time-based practice that contests or subverts the existing spatial order.⁴ Whereas Chaplin’s manipulation of the cane is tactical, the design of the set—which sets the spatial limits of the narrative—might be called strategic. Though these categories may accurately reflect certain spatial practices, the rigid, binary opposition de Certeau constructs between tactic and strategy does not accurately attend to the complexity and ingenuity of the spatial practices explored in this thesis. Contesting his position that “tactics can only use, manipulate and divert” spaces constructed by and through hegemonic, abstract models, I will contend that tactical, grassroots approaches to design often propose and enact entirely different political economies—ones that refuse the dominant order and project alternative futures. These practices occupy a liminal zone, or as Rendell calls it, the “place between” tactics and strategies.⁵

In her 2003 article “A Place Between, Art, Architecture and Critical Theory,” Rendell introduces her term “critical spatial practice,” defining it as a social, temporal and spatial landscape between different axes: art/architecture, theory/practice, public/private, the social/the aesthetic. Critical spatial practice is a mode of radical interdisciplinarity, a practice of constructing “a diagonal axis” between different polarities, of “thinking between” rather than thinking within.⁶ It borrows from the deconstructionist impulse “to destabilize binary assumptions,” focusing on the

⁴ de Certeau, xiv.

⁵ Jane Rendell, “A Place Between, Art, Architecture and Critical Theory,” in *Proceedings to Place and Location* (Tallinn, Estonia, 2003), 9.

⁶ Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London; New York: IB Tauris, 2006), 11.

interrelationships between objects rather than the objects in isolation from, or in opposition to, one another.⁷ For Rendell, critical spatial practice is also a pedagogical approach that describes and orients her own praxis as an architect-academic working in the space between the disciplines of art, architecture, and critical theory.

I begin this thesis with a discussion of de Certeau's term spatial practices and Rendell's term critical spatial practices to draw a quasi-etymology of a neologism proposed in this thesis: space-praxis. Space-praxis is, in part, akin to what Michel de Certeau once called spatial practices—everyday acts of appropriation, clauses that constitute “an urban text.”⁸ However space-praxis, as an analytic, collapses de Certeau's bifurcated definitions of tactic and strategy. Much like tactics, space-praxes are grounded in certain places, and at first glance may appear fragmentary. Much like strategies, space-praxes open up the possibility for a new set of relations between architecture and activism. Space-praxis is necessarily a feminist mode of expression both because of its history of use in feminist circles, and because it forces architecture to encounter (non)disciplinary other(s): namely activism, feminism, and anti-racism. It reveals the many ways in which the design of the built environment is already political, and proposes alternative modes of interacting with the material world. Space-praxis is both theory and practice. The technologies and spaces that space-practitioners create are material manifestations of developing concepts, and as a result, they often appear unresolved, even messy. Though the aesthetics of these spaces can be read and situated, they often bely the more progressive spatial dimensions at play. Space-praxis relies on what Hélène Frichot has called concept-tools, geopolitically sited ways of thinking-and-doing that

⁷ Rendell (2006), 9.

⁸ de Certeau, 93.

enact a “material, collaborative practice.”⁹ For space practitioners—who are rarely self-professed designers, though environmental approaches are central to their activism—survival is always a collective endeavor, a sort of “political warfare,” as feminist writer Audre Lorde once wrote.¹⁰

As a direct descendant of Rendell’s critical spatial practices, space-praxes too exist in between. However, space-praxis is less interested in the space between disciplines within the academy than it is in the relationship between professionalized architectural practice and non-professionalized architectural practice, or the triangulated space between architecture, feminism, and activism. Learning from the methodologies expressed via critical spatial practice, space-praxis enters this other, underexplored space in between. The ethics of this move are charged, and it must be clearly stated that the intention is not to suggest that architects should instrumentalize the design practices of activists in order to meet their own (a)political ends. Rather, this thesis hopes to gesture towards the many ways that space is already essential to progressive political projects, and encourage architects to remove their disciplinary blinders.

Though space-praxis, as it is defined in this thesis, responds to a body of work on spatial practice authored by de Certeau and Rendell, it is perhaps most directly in conversation with spatial thinkers and intersectional feminist theorists Sara Ahmed and bell hooks, both of whom have been profoundly invested in the project of feminist worldmaking. In her book *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed claims that she thinks “of feminism as a building project,” one in which materials and processes of making must be

⁹ Hélène Frichot, *Creative Ecologies: Theorizing the Practice of Architecture* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), 186.

¹⁰ Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Firebrand Books, 1988), 131.

taken seriously.¹¹ Though many of Ahmed's readers take her deeply architectural language to be purely metaphorical, this thesis takes her writing, and in particular her provocation that feminism can be understood as a project and praxis of construction, quite seriously on a material level as well as a theoretical one. Read in this way, Ahmed is not only making a call for (re)constructing feminist political movements, but also for building spaces in which those movements can be "given a place."¹² The spaces described in this thesis, whether in Oakland, New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, greater Boston, or elsewhere, represent concrete, historical examples of feminist building projects. They are sites where women have gathered, convened, and found shelter, both for themselves and the political movements they were/are building.

In her famous essay "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," published almost three decades prior to Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life*, bell hooks also argued for the need to "invent spaces of radical openness" where a new, intersectional feminist movement could be nurtured.¹³ For hooks, such spaces have been both real and imagined, yet they have always existed in the margins of dominant culture and ideology. Inhabited by Black women, women of color, and other oppressed peoples, the margin is both a space produced by social, cultural, and spatial exclusion, as well as a space where these individuals can build communities of resistance, and develop "a radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives," and "new worlds."¹⁴ The space-praxis hooks gestures towards here is a practice of reimagining marginal spaces as central

¹¹ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 14.

¹² Ahmed, 3.

¹³ bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989), 19.

¹⁴ hooks (1989), 20.

to feminist movement-building, and act which requires that one eye be always directed towards building what hooks calls “a counter hegemonic discourse,” and another eye always cast towards designing spaces that can support that discourse as well as feminist protest and action.¹⁵

In the Fall of 2014, artist Simone Leigh designed a space that aligned with hooks’ and Ahmed’s theories of feminist placemaking, the Free People’s Medical Clinic—a performative installation project that engaged with issues of health, race, gender, and grass roots community care. Unfolding over three weeks, the project offered HIV screenings, Affordable Care Act navigation workshops, Pilates, acupuncture, Caribbean herbalism lessons, and well woman care¹⁶ amongst other emergent health services and activities. The Free People’s Medical Clinic drew on a variety of contextual historical references, from the Black Panther Party’s community health initiatives in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, including their brick-and-mortar People’s Free Medical Centers, to the United Order of Tents, a secret society of Black nurses who have operated unremittingly since 1861, and whose New York headquarters was positioned only three blocks from Leigh’s project. The very site of the Free People’s Medical Center bore significance as well, as it was the former home of Dr. Josephine English, one of the first Black OB-GYNS in New York. In weaving together these histories, Leigh’s hybrid activist-art program projected health services and practices by Black women, for Black women. Connecting historical and contemporary practices of care was, for Leigh, a matter of

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Well-woman care is a form of preventative medicine focused on women’s reproductive health.

survival. In her own words, “there is a lot to mine in terms of figuring out the survival tools these women have used to be so successful, despite being so compromised.”¹⁷

However, the Free People’s Medical Center was more than just an assembled archive of Black women’s historical struggle for health, or a memorial to those who lost their lives to the violent tides of medical discrimination. As Helen Molesworth, chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, has argued, Leigh’s project was also a historical extension of a “fundamental act of resistance: space claiming.”¹⁸ In Molesworth’s formulation, vis-à-vis Simone Leigh’s artistic practice, space claiming is a radical political act, allowing activists, artists, and everyday people to recenter stories and practices that are otherwise excluded from mainstream culture. Space claiming provides the intimacy and privacy necessary to experiment and imagine other social relations, but it is also a fundamentally visual, spatial, and geographical operation. Leigh’s act of claiming space could also be described as a practice of holding space; it is necessarily intimate, temporary, and often fleeting, yet it remains highly contested, political, and an often dangerous endeavor. It simultaneously gestures towards the possibility of a different relationship with space, one based on collective need rather than private accumulation, and creates the conditions necessary for women to care for one another in the present moment.

Space claiming is a kind of space-praxis. Both terms imply the centrality of space in heretical, feminist practices of survival. But space-praxis, as opposed to space

¹⁷ Robin Pogrebin and Hilarie M. Sheets, “An Artist Ascendant: Simone Leigh Moves Into the Mainstream,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 2018. Accessed online. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/29/arts/design/simone-leigh-sculpture-high-line.html>.

¹⁸ Helen Molesworth, “Art is Medicine: Helen Molesworth on the work of Simone Leigh,” *Artforum* 56, no. 7, March 2018. Accessed online. <https://www.artforum.com/print/201803/helen-molesworth-on-the-work-of-simone-leigh-74304>.

claiming/holding, perhaps better captures the dynamic, iterative challenges on display in Leigh's project—the challenges of inhabiting spaces within a system that is diametrically opposed to the health, wellness, or survival of certain women's bodies. As architect Bryony Roberts contends in her guest edited edition of *Log*, “praxis reveals how individuals shaped by systemic constraints can still repurpose and remake found conditions to potentially liberatory ends.”¹⁹ Far from passive, space-praxis is a kind of architectural practice that requires shuffling, reorganizing, and reorienting the existing built environment until workable, sustainable geographies come into resolution. In this way, space-praxis is also improvisational—it grasps at fragments of the material world and combines them to produce dissonant, emancipatory socio-spatial outcomes.

This thesis, first and foremost, operates as an extended exploration of space-praxis, an incomplete archive of activists and grassroots projects that gesture towards what space-praxis has historically meant, and what it could mean for feminists in their enduring efforts to transform the built environment. It is also akin to what Donna Haraway has called a heteroglossia: a collection of situated, feminist modes of thought and practice that work against the production of a universal, hegemonic theory.²⁰ Or as Hélène Frichot has described it, a flexible framework that “allows diverse or ‘different’ (hetero) definitions of concepts to sit alongside, and brush up against, one another.”²¹ Likewise, space-praxis is not a globalizing theory in and of itself, but rather an assemblage, or heteroglossia, of theories, practices, and grounded perspectives. While the

¹⁹ Bryony Roberts, “Expanding Modes of Practice,” *Log* 48, no. 1 (New York: Anyone Corporation, 2020), 11-12.

²⁰ Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist- Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 67-68.

²¹ Hélène Frichot, *How to Make Yourself a Feminist Design Power Tool* (Baunach: Spurbuchverlag, 2016), 113.

relation of gender to the built environment is my primary object of study, race, sexuality and class are very often central to the space-praxes examined in this project. For many of the space-practitioners to be discussed, race, gender, sexual and class discrimination converge in their everyday lives, and thus their understanding of gender cannot be separated from other identity formations. Terms like ‘gender,’ ‘women,’ and ‘feminism’ are not globally defined in this project, emerging instead from the situated, partial experiences of the space-practitioners examined in the forthcoming pages.

Reproduction, Repair, & Infrastructures of Care

The buildings, people, and political movements discussed in this thesis are connected not only through their various relationships to space-praxis, but also via their entanglements with issues of reproduction and reproductive justice. I consider ‘reproduction’ to mean a heterogeneous assemblage of biological and social processes, as well as a system of labor. In the mid-1960s, “reproductive politics” became central to the politics of so-called Second Wave feminists, who defined it as a multivalent political project advocating for women’s rights with regards to contraception, abortion, sterilization, adoption, and sexuality.²² Constructed in this way, reproductive rights were directly connected to the woman’s body, and her right to biological self-governance. Social reproduction, on the other hand, is much more broadly concerned with the actions and networks that support human life and agency; these are largely gendered labors of care including, but not limited to, agricultural production, cooking, childcare, housework, and teaching.

²² Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Politics: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

Social reproduction theory, which is also at the core of this thesis, asks questions about the social conditions that make subsistence possible, such as “what kinds of processes enable the worker to arrive at the doors of her place of work everyday,” or “what role did breakfast play in her (the worker’s) work-readiness?”²³ As Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal note in their edited volume *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture*, our current epoch is marked by a “crisis of reproduction,” in which the various institutions that sustain human life have become deeply politicized, privatized, and as a consequence, exist in an enduring state of precarity. This crisis is defined by state withdrawal of “support for housing, health, education, childcare, care, the environment, wildlife, low-carbon technologies, the civic sector and culture” on a global scale, something we might otherwise term the precondition of global neoliberal governance.²⁴ Architecture has been complicit in this disavowal of mutual care systems. As fewer and fewer spaces of collectivity—or architectural commons—are commissioned and built, the downsizing of socialized institutions is also hastened. In order to contain the scope of this thesis, I will not conduct a thorough analysis of the role the architectural profession has played in accelerating the collapse of social reproductive systems. These issues are explored in Petrescu and Trogal’s aforementioned edited volume, but much more work needs to be done. Instead, this thesis looks towards liberative practices of repair in order to suggest the ways in which we might mend, rebuild, and reimagine ailing infrastructures of care.

²³ Tithi Bhattacharya, “Mapping Social Reproduction Theory,” *Verso Books*, February 15, 2018.

²⁴ Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal, *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture: Politics, Values and Actions in Contemporary Practice* (New York, Routledge, 2017), 1.

Repair, as Trogal and Valeria Graziano note, is a specific kind of social reproductive labor. As a “regime of practice,” repair ensures the sustenance of life—whether that is the life of an individual, a community, and institution, or a corporation.²⁵ In and of itself, repair is not inherently ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ Community activists might take on projects that involve repairing dilapidated homes, or social bonds in neighborhoods that have been atomized by urban renewal, and on the other hand, corporations might repair inefficient financial models in order to extract more capital gains. Like social reproduction, processes of repair hold “the possibility to protest, to reconfigure, to prefigure alternatives to current regimes” as well as the potential for further reinforcing the power and centrality of those regimes.²⁶ With an understanding that not all repair is equivalent, I will foreground the reparative practices of women—particularly queer women and women of color—that seek to mend broken spaces and systems in order to insure community wellbeing and survival.

Though diverse and varied, the practices of repair explored in this thesis can be roughly defined in three ways. First, they are praxes that allow women to reclaim agency in environments where the capacity for self-expression, safety, and survival is otherwise narrow. This is what bell hooks refers to when she speaks of her grandmother’s house as a site of resistance. It is a space in which her grandmother can provide the care and nurturance necessary for her family-members and community at large to survive in a world marked by racist/patriarchal domination. Through Black feminist techniques of repair, the home can also become a “crucial site for organizing, for forming political

²⁵ Valeria Graziano and Kim Trogal, “Repair Matters,” *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 19, no.2 (2019), 203.

²⁶ Graziano and Trogal, 208.

solidarity.”²⁷ Second, feminist space-praxes of repair often intentionally make the gendered and racialized nature of reproductive labor visible, nuancing class-based arguments about the unequalness of work. Mierle Laderman Ukeles made this the message of her 1973 performance piece “Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside,” in which she documented herself mopping and scrubbing the steps in front of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, CT. In elevating this reproductive, reparative labor to the level of art, Ukeles forced her audience—particularly those involved in masculinist, Leftist political movements—to confront the question: “after the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?”²⁸ Such work, like many of the activist projects in this thesis, has a way of knocking the dust off of naturalized social hierarchies and forcing them to sit in uncomfortable daylight.

Finally, some of the acts of repair described in this thesis are intended to provoke readers to think more broadly about the project of reparations in the U.S.—a project with which, I strongly believe, feminists should more assertively ally themselves. In the last chapter on the women of the Moms for Housing, Mothers/Men Against Senseless Killings, and the Black Panther Party (which I will explain in more detail below) the racial and gendered contours of real estate speculation, policing, and government services (or the lack thereof) are made plain. These realities are, in and of themselves, evidence to support the direct funding of alternative institutions reimagining housing rights, land tenure, community accountability, and social services. Women—particularly women of

²⁷ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 47.

²⁸ Mierle Laderman Ukeles, “Maintenance art Manifesto” in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Source Book of Artist’s Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Oakland, University of California Press, 1996 [1969]), 622.

color—have already been doing the work of alternative institution building for centuries in this country. There is much to learn from their reparative, abolitionist space-praxes.

While the ethos of this thesis is anti-racist, several of the projects explored herein carry the baggage of racial discrimination in their work. I have attempted to trace the contours of racial fracturing within concrete examples of feminist organizing, and to expose the whiteness of second wave feminism in particular. Without proper recognition of these political failures, we risk reproducing them in our present and future movements.

Project Outline

In Chapter 1 I explore the history and socio-political significance of five ‘women’s buildings’ that appeared in New York, Los Angeles, and Cambridge (MA) from 1970 to 1973. These edifices include the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) House, stewarded by transgender activists Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson; the Fifth Street Women’s Building, a short-lived space in New York City that bore connections to the prominent Cooper Square Development Committee; the Women’s Liberation Center of New York City, the long-term home of Lesbian Feminist Liberation among other groups; the Cambridge Women’s Educational Center, which was founded through an occupation of a Harvard University-owned building; and the Los Angeles Woman’s Building, a hub of feminist artistic practice in the U.S. for almost two decades. Each of these buildings was situated within its own distinct ecology of feminist activism, and at times the women that stewarded these spaces fell prey to divisive, sectarian politics. Taken as a collection, however, these built artifacts and the movements they represented reveal a radical investment in the formation of commons, as well as a

denunciation of government negligence and discrimination, institutional land accumulation, and the privatization of space. In turn, this chapter introduces an array of feminist imperatives—health, housing, food access, among others—that are expanded upon in more detail in the chapters that follow.

The second chapter of this thesis turns to the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers—a group of allied, feminist self-help clinics in the United States—considering the ways in which buildings were mobilized as sites of feminist intervention in the fight for abortion access and feminist health education. Within the so-called 'participatory' clinic, women advanced self-help—a philosophical system and mode of counter-conduct that promoted the radical reclamation of women's health practices into feminist circles and necessitated new approaches to designing clinic interiors and technologies. Under the leadership of Carol Downer and Lorraine Rothman, FWHC lay-clinicians productively redefined accepted relationships between bodies, objects, and space. The clinic, in turn, acted as a medium for spatial appropriation, allowing its tenants to subvert material manifestations of power to productive, political ends. The chapter also explores the invention and use of the Del-Em at the Feminist Women's Health Center, an easily assembled device that enabled women to complete early stage abortions outside of a hospital setting.

Arriving at the contemporary moment, Chapter 3 presents the work of two contemporary Black feminist collectives: Mothers/Men Against Senseless Killings (MASK) and Moms for Housing. Founded by Tamar Manasseh, a Black mother living in Chicago's Englewood neighborhood, MASK was established to counteract violence and crime in Chicago by occupying the city block, hanging out, cooking, and “emanating

love.”²⁹ In using their embodied presence as a tactical tool, MASK members have decreased gun violence, strengthened community support infrastructures, and bolstered systems of mutual accountability in their neighborhood. Further, MASK’s “visionary pragmatism” calls for replacing policing with systems of repair and strengthened neighborhood kinship networks.³⁰ Their recently completed MASK Resource Center on the corner of S. Stewart Ave and W. 75th Street is one such site where neighborhood kinship ties are strengthened and mutual aid is practiced. The chapter attempts to situate this architectural space in historical context, drawing parallels between it and the Black Panther Party’s People’s Free Medical Clinics from the 1970s.

Moms for Housing extends the ethos of Black motherhood, and its attentiveness to care, community, and survival, to confront contemporary issues of housing injustice. The collective was founded with a radical act: on November 18, 2019, two unhoused women, Dominique Walker and Sameerah Karim, moved into a vacant house in Oakland, reclaiming the space from house-flipping real estate conglomerate Wedgewood Properties to serve as shelter for themselves and their children. Their radical spatial occupation shed light on the cruel truth that there are more vacant homes than homeless individuals in Oakland, CA. Fueled by real estate greed for profit, many houses in the Bay Area go unoccupied for years at a time, while homeless and marginally housed individuals and families continue to live in overcrowded shelters or on the street. But rather than subscribing to the racialized logics that underpin both NIBMY (not in my backyard) and YIMBY (yes in my backyard) politics, Moms for Housing’s activism

²⁹ “Our Mission,” MASK Website, accessed June 10, 2020, <https://www.onthe-block.org/about>.

³⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Second Edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 184.

suggests an alternative relationship to land and shelter, one not based on profit but the furnishing of community members' basic, material needs.³¹

At the terminus of this project, I will argue against the popular notion that some of these projects were failures, having not irreparably changed systems of oppression still at work today. Beyond gleaning specific policy changes, the projects gesture towards a different kind of politics—one focused on the abolition of heterosexist and racist spatial scripts, as well as the building of feminist commons and spaces for mutual care. Rather than playing a political short-game that demands assimilation into broken systems, these projects remain invested in alternative, feminist futures.

A Brief Note on Method

How can we learn from practices of spatial reorganization, intentional impermanence, and ad hoc experimentation that change the potentials of our environments—particularly when such practices often go undocumented, or evade traditional modes of architectural representation? In writing this thesis, I am indebted to a number of architectural historians and theorists who have turned their attention to activist space-praxes. Among them Susana Torre, whose work on the Mothers of the Plaza Mayo explores how the group of Argentinian women appropriated public space and challenged architecture's complicity with military power; Meike Schalk and Elke Krasny, whose work on the Spanish activist collective Precarias a la Deriva helps us to map and shed light on the spaces of feminized labor in Madrid; and Keller Easterling, whose writings on community-led land readjustment interplay, Social Capital Credits, and other activist

³¹ Erin McElroy and Andrew Szeto, "The Racial Contours of YIMBY/NIMBY Bay Area Gentrification," *Berkeley Planning Journal* 29, no. 1 (2017), 24.

space-praxes have pushed me to consider how feminist approaches to design might be retooled to have compounding effects.³²

This work has required an aesthetic re-attunement on my own part as I, like many built environment researchers, have been trained to associate certain political possibilities within architecture with specific visual tropes—from glossy renderings to legible plans. With this work, I insist on the importance of small alterations, of design without blueprints, of construction projects that begin after the contractor’s work is done. As such, I rely on photographs, home videos, defunct newspaper clippings, organizational newsletters, and oral histories among other sources to portray architectural spaces, rather than referring to architectural drawings per se. The frequent assessment of such documents as marginal within architectural discourse has, of course, a gendered subtext. To paraphrase architect and historian Karen Burns, the archive assembled here-within could also be considered an “archaeology of feminist knowledge,” a collection of rediscovered artifacts exhumed in order to inform “our toolkits for action now.”³³ On dig sites, archaeologists are accustomed to making meaning from fragmented artifacts by placing them within a broader context of cultural history. Much of the same will occur in

³² Susana Torre, “Claiming the Public Space: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo,” in *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, ed. Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 140-145. Elke Krasny and Meike Schalk, “Resilient Subjects: On Building Imaginary Communities,” in *Feminist Futures of Spatial Practice: Materialisms, Activisms, Dialogues, Pedagogies, Projections* ed. Meike Schalk, Therese Kristiansson, Ramia Maze (Baunach: AADR – Art Architecture Design Research, an imprint of Spurbuchverlag, 2017), 139-147. Keller Easterling, *Medium Design: Knowing How to Work on the World* (London; New York: Verso, 2021).

³³ Karen Burns, “Feminist theory and praxis, 1991-2003” in *Architecture and Feminisms* (Yale Publications on Architecture), ed. Debra Coleman, Elizabeth Danze and Carol Henderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 22.

this thesis. I hope that the following stories, though partial and limited in their own ways, will bear a different significance as a whole than they might separately.

Chapter 1.

Feminist Takeover: Designing Multidimensional Commons

To be a part of a movement requires we find places to gather, meeting places. A movement is also a shelter. We convene; we have a convention. A movement comes into existence to transform what is in existence. A movement needs to take place somewhere. A movement is not just or only a movement; there is something that needs to be kept still, given a place, if we are moved to transform what is.³⁴

Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*

The early 1970s saw pivotal changes in the women's liberation movement; emboldened by the success of political demonstrations like the Miss America Protest of 1968 and the New York Abortion Speak-out of 1969, women of all stripes were starting to participate in, and expand the boundaries of, the American feminist project. The movement, which had once revolved around the National Organization for Women (NOW), was becoming a more loosely connected coalition of diverse factions—socialists, radicals, lesbian, and eco feminists, trans*³⁵ activists and health activists, among others—all with their own, specific agendas for women's liberation. In this time

³⁴ Ahmed (2017), 3.

³⁵ I will often use “trans*” instead of “trans,” “transgender,” “transsexual” to indicate that there is no one singular definition or category of trans identity. Much in the way that Jack Halberstam uses trans*, I am interested in invoking what Halberstam calls the “bagginess of the category of transgender,” which allows for vast heterogeneity and fluidity in gender identification.

of expansion, the need for permanent, movement clearing houses became increasingly evident, and in response, women all over the country began establishing so-called women's 'centers,' 'houses,' and 'buildings.' Most were in Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) buildings, church basements, women's apartments, and other shared spaces, but a few tenacious collectives attempted to carve out their own space by purchasing, renting, or squatting in vacant buildings. This chapter presents five examples of the latter instance: the Women's Liberation Center, the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) House, and the Fifth Street building take-over in New York City; the Cambridge Women's Center in Massachusetts; and the Los Angeles Woman's Building. Founded between 1970 and 1973, these buildings were linchpins in emerging geography of gender-centered activism in the United States, and are analyzed together here because of the significant way in which they can inform an intersectional, feminist politics of design.

In his book *One-Dimensional Queer*, Roderick Ferguson revisits the early years of gay liberation, predominantly from 1969 to 1973, during which "struggles over race, gender, class, and sexuality were," in significant instances, "imagined not separately but simultaneously."³⁶ Ferguson marks this historical moment as the origins of a multi-dimensional gay liberation, a period of cross-movement dialogue and solidarity among radicals that flourished until it was traded in for a de-radicalized, single-issue gay rights agenda that all but ejected transgender, Black, Latinx, women, poor, and homeless activists from the movement. Ferguson problematizes the prevailing narrative that intersectionality as a concept, and intersectional politics as praxis, are contemporary

³⁶ Roderick Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer* (Cambridge and Medford: Polity Press, 2019), 20.

phenomena. Looking at the history of groups like Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), the Combahee River Collective, the Black Panther Party, and the Young Lords, Ferguson unearths stories of cross-movement solidarity from the archives of American social movements. Critically, the five women's buildings explored in this chapter emerged within this same brief moment of multidimensional political action, and, like the groups that Ferguson historicizes, they were counted in a milieu of feminist, anti-racist, anti-homophobic, and anti-war activist campaigns.

The women of these building projects modeled their tactics after these adjacent movements and even forged alliances—to varying degrees of success—with Black, Latinx, gay, anti-war, and working class activists. For example, the squatting tactics adopted in the building takeovers at 888 Memorial Drive in Cambridge and at 330 E. Fifth Street in New York City borrowed from the grammar of the Puerto Rican and Dominican-led squatting movement Operation Move-in on New York's Upper West Side during the summer of 1970, as well as the student-led anti-war building occupations like the one on Harvard's campus in 1969. Radical feminists and socialist feminists often collected bail funds for incarcerated Black Panther women, and were active participants anti-racist protests like May Day in New Haven, CT.³⁷ Of course, even in their early formation, rank-and-file members of second-wave feminist organizations were largely

³⁷ Loosely, both radical feminists and socialist feminists viewed themselves as separate from liberal feminist organizations like the National Organization of Women (NOW), which were more interested in women's rights and assimilation into the U.S. 'mainstream' than they were rejecting it outright. Radical feminists viewed the patriarchy as the primary power structure in society, whereas socialist feminists viewed class and gender-based oppression (and to varying degrees racial oppression) as more equally weighted aspects of the prevailing power structure. Because radical feminists' activism was more directly targeting the patriarchy, they almost exclusively worked in women-only groups and organizations. Socialist feminists were more likely to develop bonds with working class men and poor people of color, though the rank-in-file of socialist feminist movements were mostly white women.

white and straight, and tragically, some did not view the institutions of whiteness and heteronormativity as destructive to their activism. This chapter traces both multidimensional moments of solidarity in these women's buildings—where we can see the seeds of an anti-racist, anti-homophobic feminist movement being planted—and moments of fracturing along class, gender, and racial lines. Through this x-ray scan of gendered, activist spaces, we might better perceive how historical articulations of space-praxis did, or did not, contribute to the development of a multidimensional feminist politics, and, as a result, we might be more critically able to reference these space-praxes in the crafting of a contemporary feminist politics of design.

The creation and nourishment of architectural commons was fundamental to the formation of this burgeoning multidimensional feminist politics. Women activists saw the radical potential of co-locating multiple movements (overtly feminist or not) under one roof, and the resulting possibility of solidarity and accountability across political imperatives. Though many of the women organizing and cultivating these spaces were not socialists, this chapter argues that we can still read these spaces through Marxist feminist notions of “the commons” which, as Silvia Federici suggests, have long “offered a logical and historical alternative to both state and private property,” enabling feminists “to reject the fiction that they are mutually exclusive and exhaustive of our political possibilities.”³⁸ The five women's buildings in this chapter proposed radically collective models of building ‘ownership.’ In all instances, women's claim to the space was not based on the payment of dues—though they were often obliged to crowdsource rent money—but rather through a commitment to communal culture and shared reproductive

³⁸ Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, Second Edition (Oakland: PM Press, 2020), 157.

labor. Showing up for meetings and events; donating time, resources, and materials; participating in collective action across different political imperatives; as well as managing building projects and repairs were all newly valued means of claiming a stake in a commonly held space.

In the contemporary moment, when our cities' scarce public spaces are being rapidly privatized, and the language of anti-racist, queer, and feminist movements are being appropriated by private industry to create a mirage of authenticity and fan the fire of urban gentrification, this history of communal women's spaces may be read with some degree of heightened urgency. This chapter by no means argues that we should replicate these women's buildings as they were, nor risk reproducing some of the social and political pitfalls of 1970s feminisms, but rather that we read within them the enduring potential of communal cultures and space-making practices to provide sustenance and aid in the face of dispossession, discrimination, and precarity.

The Women's Liberation Center

On July 1, 1970, *New York Times* columnist Marylin Bender published an article marking the opening of the first women's building in Manhattan: The Women's Liberation Center (WLC). The project was founded by a group of radical feminists in New York City who, in an effort to establish a central hub for the women's liberation movement, rented out the second floor of a building at 36 W. 22nd Street. Like others who would've visited the WLC in its nascency, Bender struggled to articulate the

atmosphere of this unprecedented environment, mischaracterizing it as a “mixture of a sorority house and a campaign headquarters.”³⁹ In fact, the WLC was neither of these things, but instead a movement clearinghouse that provided community services, cultivated cross-issue organizing, and spurred the development of a multidimensional feminist project. In particular, the WLC became a space for cooperation and coordination between straight and gay women. Up until the early 1970s, the tense relationship between these two groups had been amplified by anti-gay members of the mainstream feminist movement like Betty Friedan who, at the 1969 convention of the NOW, famously called lesbian activists a ‘lavender menace’, accusing them of threatening the progress of the women’s liberation movement.

Though the women who established the WLC did so by complying with privatized ownership structures—choosing to rent out the space instead of organizing a building squat—the way in which they procured funding for their center was quite radical. On March 18, 1970, a group of over 100 women from NOW, the Redstockings, the New York Radical Feminists, and other organizations staged an eleven hour sit-in at *The Ladies Home Journal* office in New York City. The protesters confronted the editor John Mack Carter, demanding an “all-woman editorial and advertising staffs (sic), an end to exploitative advertising, and a redirection of the editorial policy at the Journal.”⁴⁰ In a concession, Carter allowed the women to author eight articles in a future issue of the

³⁹ Marilyn Bender, “Women’s Lib Headquarters,” *The New York Times*, July 1, 1970.

⁴⁰ Jean E. Hunter, “A Daring New Concept: The Ladies’ Home Journal and Modern Feminism,” *NWSA Journal* 2, no. 4 (Autumn 1990), 583.

journal and paid them \$10,000 for their labor. Half of that fee was donated to open the WLC at 36 W. 22nd St.⁴¹

In its first two years of existence, programming at the WLC was adversely affected by the space's limited square footage. Only a small, though fiercely dedicated, group of organizations took root in the 36 W. 22nd St building, among them the Women's Abortion Project, Older Women's Liberation, a divorce and separation counseling group, and a feminist literature collective. While the women of the WLC struggled to expand their influence in the New York feminist scene, they also began the difficult work of developing an intersectional approach to feminist organizing—taking on anti-racist projects like the creation of a defense fund for incarcerated Black Panther Joan Bird, as well as lesbian-centered programming with the help of the Gay Women's Liberation Front.⁴² The group's search for a new building started almost as soon as they had moved into 36 W. 22nd Street. After months of negotiating with the city, WLC organizers had secured their new home at a rate of \$1.00/month: a three-story, Anglo-Italianate style firehouse building designed in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood.⁴³ In a May, 1972 newsletter, the WLC organizers circulated information about this new building at 234 W. 20th Street. Calling it "beautiful but decrepit," they solicited help with unpacking boxes, turning on the electricity, and beginning the difficult work of addressing the edifice's many building code violations. From the outset, the WLC

⁴¹ Cecilia Nowell, "A Firehouse Where Pioneering Feminists Have Carried the Torch," *Bedford+Bowery*, December 26, 2019. Accessed Online. <https://bedfordandbowery.com/2019/12/a-firehouse-where-pioneering-feminists-have-carried-the-torch/>.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, "Designation Report: Women's Liberation Center," June 18, 2019. Designation List 513, LP-2633, page 6.

Building Committee devised a communal organizational structure that would encourage the sharing of building maintenance tasks amongst the center's users.⁴⁴

This new center at 234 W. 20th Street expanded the WLC's footprint and its political horizons, becoming the home to influential lesbian groups like the Lesbian Food Conspiracy, Lesbian Lifespace Project, Lesbian Switchboard, and the Lesbian Feminist Liberation. Operating in the WLC from 1972 to 1987, the Lesbian Switchboard was a telephone service that provided counseling and referrals to New York's lesbian community. In her recent book *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies*, Cait McKinney unpacks notebook after notebook of Lesbian Switchboard call logs, exploring their place within the larger "information economies that lesbian telephone hotlines facilitated."⁴⁵ Much like the WLC, the Lesbian Switchboard provided a social and technological infrastructure for connecting lesbian women to other lesbians, lesbian feminist organizations, as well as social and emotional services—though it did so at a distance, allowing for callers to preserve their anonymity. The Switchboard's reach extended even beyond the sphere of lesbian-centered resources; McKinney notes, for example, that some operators not infrequently referred transgender callers to New York's Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, led by Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson.⁴⁶

Perhaps the most influential player in the WLC was the Lesbian Feminist Liberation (LFL). Co-founded in 1972 by Jean O'Leary and Eleanor Cooper, the LFL

⁴⁴ "New Building News," Women's Liberation Center of New York, May 1972. Accessed online at Kalamazoo College Digital Archive. Women's Liberation Center," June 18, 2019. Designation List 513, LP-2633, page 6.

⁴⁵ Cait McKinney, *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 69.

⁴⁶ McKinney, 74.

emerged out of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and Gay Activists Alliance (GAA), both of which had an 85-90% male membership in 1969 and 1970.⁴⁷ Frustrated by what she would later call the “rampant” sexism in the burgeoning gay liberation movement, O’Leary and almost sixty lesbians on the Lesbian Liberation Committee of the GAA struck out on their own in 1973, finding a home at the WLC on West 20th Street.⁴⁸ From the Center, members of the LFL rapped,⁴⁹ developed strategies to protect lesbian women’s legal rights, and planned direct action in the city. Among the notable demonstrations they planned were the protest on the NBC film “Born Innocent,” which depicted incarcerated lesbians as rapists, and the rally at the American Museum of Natural History, in which LFL protesters criticized the museum for displaying female animals as subservient to male animals.⁵⁰ Events like the American Museum of Natural History protest reflected nuanced critiques of how gender and sexuality were portrayed in popular culture—critiques that were made possible, in part, because of the dialogue and friendships forged between women’s libbers and lesbian feminists at the WLC.

Even as lesbian feminists and straight feminists were finding common ground through the communal work of making the WLC, transgender women were largely excluded from the space. At the 1973 Liberation Day Rally in Manhattan’s Washington Square Park, Jean O’Leary made the LFL’s position on transgender women clear when she got up on the stage in front of thousands of gay activists and stated “When men

⁴⁷ “Designation Report: Women’s Liberation Center,” 10.

⁴⁸ Ginny Vida, “Lesbian Feminist Liberation: New York City,” interview by Sonja K. Lowenfish, *Sappho* 3, no. 8 (January 1, 1975), 826.

⁴⁹ Feminist parlance for discussing personal experiences in a political framework.

⁵⁰ Les Brown, “Four Advertisers Drop Spots on Repeat of ‘Born Innocent,’” *The New York Times*, October 25, 1975.

impersonate women, for reasons of entertainment or profit, they insult women.”⁵¹ The speech was stated generally but intended as an attack on Sylvia Rivera, co-founder of the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. In her response, Rivera took the stage and made a harrowing statement:

You all tell me, go and hide my tail between my legs. I will no longer put up with this shit.

I have been beaten.

I have had my nose broken.

I have been thrown in jail.

I have lost my job.

I have lost my apartment

For gay liberation, and you all treat me this way? What the fuck’s wrong with you all?⁵²

The calamitous events of the 1973 Liberation Day Rally brought to light the anti-trans violence taking root in the women’s liberation movement.⁵³ This fracturing placed a limit on the possibility of a coalitional politics, even as organizations within the WLC like the Lesbian Switchboard sought to strengthen relationships with STAR in the years preceding 1973. Ultimately, while the Women’s Liberation Center allowed for the

⁵¹ Eric Marcus, “Jean O’Leary - Part 1,” c. 2016-2020, in Making Gay History: The Podcast, produced by Pineapple Street Media, podcast, MP3 audio, 00:11:37:00. <https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/episode-14-jean-oleary-part-1/>.

⁵² Sylvia Rivera, “Y’all Better Quiet Down: Sylvia Rivera’s Speech at the 1973 Liberation Day Rally,” in Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries: Survival, Revolt, and Queer Antagonist Struggle ed. Ehn Nothing, (Untorelli Press, 2013), 30.

⁵³ As a direct result of the 1973 Liberation Day Rally, Sylvia Rivera dropped out of the gay liberation movement. Author Ehn Nothing links this event to Rivera’s suicide attempt in 1974. FIG 6 Women’s Liberation Center, New York City, News Letter, December 1971. On the Right: Page 1, On the Left: Page 2.

development of solidarity between lesbian and straight women, trans women and gender nonconforming individuals would have to carve out a separate spatial niche in New York City—what would become known as the STAR House.

The Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) House

Founded by activists Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) was an organization of trans* and gender nonconforming individuals that played a significant role in condemning homophobia, racism, incarceration, and police violence in New York City. Though members of STAR were primarily transgender, transsexual, and gender fluid, they were active in a variety of social movements, making connections with the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords, among other radical groups. As Sylvia Rivera recalls it, “All of us were working for so many movements at the time. Everyone was involved in the women’s movement, the peace movement.”⁵⁴ Though Rivera and other future STAR members were active in the Stonewall Riot of 1969, STAR was officially born out of the 1970 occupation of New York University’s Weinstein Hall. In response to university donors who had voiced concerns about homosexuality on the New York University (NYU) campus, NYU cancelled a dance-a-thon event benefitting the New York LGBTQ+ community and banned all future LGBTQ+ social events from happening on university property. In the days following the ban, a broad spectrum of gay, lesbian, and trans* community members—including Rivera and Johnson—joined forces with NYU students to stage an

⁵⁴ Sylvia Rivera, “I’m Glad I Was in the Stonewall Riot,” in *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries: Survival, Revolt, and Queer Antagonist Struggle* ed. Ehn Nothing, (Untorelli Press, 2013), 13.

occupation of Weinstein Hall. Their actions were quickly countered with the University's harsh environmental tactics, including the overcooling and overheating of Weinstein Hall, until the protesters were eventually evicted by riot police.⁵⁵

Though the anti-establishment, anti-homophobic political ethos of the Weinstein Hall occupation was certainly central to STAR's founding mission, so too was the spatial language of that protest. As Roderick Ferguson recounts, the space-praxis that STAR-affiliates, gay liberationists, and students developed was "organized around redistributing university space for subjects and practices that previously had no place in and claim to that space."⁵⁶ Put otherwise, Rivera, Johnson, and the Weinstein Hall protestors directly rejected the university's role as an engine of both privatization and homophobia in Manhattan's Greenwich Village, and through their political action, imagined a different claim to space that would center the needs of LGBTQ+ communities. Rivera and Johnson had rehearsed their own inclusive space-praxes prior to Weinstein Hall, housing "street kids" wherever they could find safe shelter; at one point, they had moved almost two dozen trans* youth into a trailer truck in a Greenwich Village parking lot.⁵⁷ After Weinstein Hall, Rivera, Johnson, and their fellow STARs Andorra, Bubbles, and Bambi located a permanent residence for a STAR House at 213 E 2nd Street.

In an article describing his visit to the STAR House, *Village Voice* columnist Arthur Bell called the house a "dilapidated hellhole of a building."⁵⁸ STAR's landlord, Mike Umbers, agreed to rent Bubbles the apartment for two thirds the legal rent amount

⁵⁵ Washington Square News Editorial Board, "NYU Still Needs to Take Action for LGBTQ+ Rights," *Washington Square News Online*, September 21, 2020. <https://nyunews.com/opinion/2020/09/21/nyu-weinstein-occupation-anniversary-lgbtq-oppression/#>.

⁵⁶ Ferguson, 27.

⁵⁷ Nothing, 9.

⁵⁸ Arthur Bell, "STAR trek," *The Village Voice* (July 15, 1971), 46.

if she and the STAR members fixed it up. With no heat, no potable water, and no flushing toilets, they had inherited an impossible maintenance project. Though building renovation was a concern for STAR members—to the extent that it made the building inhabitable—they also had to attend to an array of other immediate needs. The matriarchs of the STAR House paid the rent, kept the lights on, fed and clothed trans* youth with money from sex work and bake sales, while youth shoplifted food from nearby grocery stores. In addition to serving trans* youth, the STAR House became a neighborhood hub for social services. In Rivera’s recollection,

... everybody in the neighborhood loved STAR House. They were impressed because they could leave their kids and we’d baby-sit with them. If they were hungry, we fed them. We fed half of the neighborhood because we had an abundance of food the kids liberated. It was a revolutionary thing.⁵⁹

As Ferguson has observed, the STAR House’s strategic location adjacent to the Bowery neighborhood, which, at the time, was home to both a significant trans* community and homeless community, provided an optimal geographic location in which “transgender liberation could be united with an anti-poverty politics.”⁶⁰

In addition to furnishing the broader community’s material needs, the STAR House was a site where queer modes of kinship were formulated and rehearsed. The STAR women who ran the house assumed a matriarchal subject position, often calling the trans* youth and residents of the STAR House their “children” or “kids.” However, the basis upon which Rivera, Johnson, and other STAR matriarchs related to their ‘children’ was not biological, but rather social and political. Brought together under the

⁵⁹ Sylvia Rivera, “Bitch on Wheels: A Speech by Sylvia Rivera, June 2001,” in *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries: Survival, Revolt, and Queer Antagonist Struggle* ed. Ehn Nothing, (Untorelli Press, 2013), 53.

⁶⁰ Ferguson, 34.

roof of their house, STAR members created the emotional and material conditions upon which their lives as trans* individuals could be made livable. In historian Jessi Gan's estimation, such "articulations of kinship, family, and community exceed models of kinship built upon heterosexual reproduction," which are founded on principles of exclusion and privacy. Like the relationships formed within it, the STAR House itself was a distinctly queer articulation of the single-family home which, in the 1950s and 1960s, was romanticized and advertised as a space for white, cis-gender women to perform social reproductive tasks for their husband and children. In stark contradiction, the STAR House was a site of queer kinship, in which Black, brown, trans*, queer, and poor folks worked collectively to care for the building and one another.

As historian of trans* history Susan Stryker notes, the STAR House was not just a building or source of shelter, but also an "overtly politicized version of 'house' culture that already characterized black and Latino queer kinship networks" in New York City.⁶¹ As early as the turn of the 20th century, the Black and Latinx queer community founded New York's drag ball geography—comprised of a constellation of 'houses' where non-White, non-binary queers could congregate, dance and perform for one another in drag. By the 1970s and 1980s, each house on the ball circuit was led by a trans* matriarch, for whom the house itself was named.⁶² Newcomers to the drag ball circuit allied themselves with particular houses, where they could find shelter, financial support, advice, food, and pleasure. Like the STAR House, ball houses often operated as stand-ins for the homes from which trans* youth were ejected in response to their gender expression; but unlike

⁶¹ Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 86.

⁶² For example, in the film *Paris is Burning* the audience is introduced to Pepper LaBeija, a drag queen for whom the House of LaBeija is named.

the homes of heterosexual families, ball houses did not endorse Victorian ideals like domesticity or privacy. Rather, members of the ball houses, like the STAR members, actively refuted domestic ideals predicated on binarily gendered and racialized reproductive labor.

In his text “Homes, Houses, Non-Identity: Paris is Burning,” Chandan Reddy analyzes queer modes of kinship and ownership in the film *Paris is Burning*—a documentary film portraying late 1980s ball culture in New York—as they stand in contrast to the logics of social division and privatization that define the white American home. For Reddy, the white U.S. home is a “social location whose material reproduction and maintenance require the forms of social division and organization...instantiated and sustained by the modern U.S. State and its public culture.” Put otherwise, the U.S. home is materially constructed and sustained through the production of social difference—necessitating that certain racialized and gendered bodies perform the lion’s share of maintenance and care labor. Though Reddy concurs that, in the life of trans* youth, the ball house serves as a replacement for the home, he also argues that the ball house did not reproduce the logic of heteronormativity endorsed by the archetypical American home, instead embracing “collectivities founded precisely on heterogeneity and nonidentity.”⁶³ Reddy’s argument is essential to understanding the STAR House, because it explicates the kind of relationship that trans* individuals in New York had/have to space—one based on collectivity and heterogeneity rather than privacy and singularity. Indeed, these new definitions of social categories like ‘the family’ and ‘the house,’ which fundamentally destabilized the original meaning of those terms, manifested themselves in

⁶³ Chandan Reddy, “Home, Houses, Nonidentity: Paris is Burning” in *Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), 356.

places like the STAR House, where a radically inclusive approach to space-making was nourished.

Around eight months after they had moved into 213 E 2nd Street, STAR was evicted from their house. In her parting moment with the house, Rivera told *Village Voice* writer Arthur Bell

We had a dream. We still do have a dream. We wanted a house for street people, and it's all down the drain again. It's one chance in a million we'll find another building. Maybe the next time we'll succeed. People will back us up.⁶⁴

Though Rivera later found some space for STAR to operate out of at 640 E 12th Street, the STAR House never fully took shape again. Its legacy, however, lived on in sites like the Transy House, a former shelter and community center for trans* and gender-nonconforming people in Brooklyn that operated from 1995 to 2008.⁶⁵ Politically, the STAR House still meaningfully reshapes contemporary understandings of shelter, kinship, and commons.

The Fifth Street Women's Building

Less than two months after Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson had secured the first S.T.A.R. house, around 75 women gathered in the basement of Manhattan's Washington Square Church with the hopes of participating in the founding of a new women's community center.⁶⁶ Rather than finding an amicable landlord and paying rent

⁶⁴ Bell, 46.

⁶⁵ NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, "Transy House," accessed online. <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/transy-house/>.

⁶⁶ In her article "New Year's on East 5th: enter through the window," *The Village Voice* writer Minda Bikman recorded that "more than 75" women had gathered in the building the first night, and a number more had arrived in subsequent days. According to the narration in the

for this new center, as Rivera and Johnson had, the women of the take-over would be squatters—refusing to pay for what they insisted should already be theirs. Some Leftists had seen the event notice published in *Rat: Subterranean News*, calling women to come together and claim a space for communal housing, “a health project, feminist art and media project, child care, feminist school, etc,” on New Year’s Eve, 1970.⁶⁷ The advertisement pulled no punches, warning women who would participate not to bring drugs, weapons, or anything resembling them in the chance that they were confronted by the police; the squatting organizers had also secured the support of the Mass Defense Office of the Lawyers’ Guild, and included the its phone number in anticipation of potential arrests. Departing from the church in the night, they marched through the snow to 330 E. 5th Street, chanting “sur le compte de venu, combattants continuent,” a refrain sung by Parisian protesters during the civil unrest of May 1968.⁶⁸ When they arrived at the building, they crawled through a shattered window with flash lights, sleeping bags, and other basic supplies.⁶⁹

The chosen edifice was a former Emergency Welfare Center that had been selected by the leading organizers—Reeni Goldin, Susan Sherman, June Arnold, Sarah Davidson, Buffy Yasmin, and Jane Lurie—from a list of vacant, government-owned properties.⁷⁰ It was five units wide and four stories tall, with a pleasant yet unremarkable

Jane Lurie’s film, over one hundred women participated in the break-in on the first night. A third account, Liza Cowan’s interview with Reeni Goldin, records that up to 200 women were on site in the first days of the building takeover.

⁶⁷ Image of notice.

⁶⁸ Minda Bikman, “New Year’s on East 5th: enter through the window,” *The Village Voice* (January 7, 1971): 44.

⁶⁹ Jane Lurie, “The Fifth Street Women’s Building Film,” (c. 1973).

⁷⁰ Liza Cowan, “Side Trip: The Fifth Street Women’s Building Takeover: A Feminist Urban Action, January 1971,” *Dyke, a Quarterly online*, July 26, 2012.

brick facade that would've blended in on this East Village block had it not had so many broken windows. Though the HVAC system was off, the plumbing system disconnected, and the space dilapidated from disuse, it offered substantially more square footage than the Women's Liberation Center on W. 22nd St or any other shared auxiliary rooms in YWCAs, churches, and community centers around Manhattan. Sweeping trash and glass off the floor, the women made the space habitable for the night and settled into what they hoped—in vain—would be a long term neighborhood hub for the women's liberation movement.

Though the Fifth Street Women's Building (FSWB), as it would come to be called, lasted only two weeks before the police raided the center and arrested 27 women, it served as a testing ground for non-hierarchical living strategies and the development of self-determined, community-based social programming.⁷¹ As was typical of the women's liberation movement at the time, the majority of women involved in the squat were white, though some Latinx women came into the project and provided crucial contributions to the project like the translation of fliers into Spanish. An account of events that transpired over the first two weeks of 1971 was recorded in these fliers, in a 15-minute documentary film by Jane Lurie, oral histories, newspapers, and it was even abstracted into fiction.⁷² In their first flier, the organizers announced the programs they intended to establish: a food

⁷¹ On the evening of January 12, three women were arrested. The following morning, twenty-four more were arrested and, according to Jane Lurie's film, some of them were violently beaten by the police.

⁷² Feminist writer June Arnold, a co-instigator of the 5th Street Women's Building take-over, published *Cook and the Carpenter* in 1973. The novel told the fictional story of a group of women who took over an abandoned public school in Texas, and is in many ways referential to the building squat in New York. In the book's dedication, Arnold writes, "In Memoriam / Fifth Street Women's Building / 330 East 5th St., New York City / January 1, 1971 - January 13, 1971 / (Now a parking lot for policemen of the 9th Precinct, Manhattan)."

co-op, a child-care center, a health clinic, a lesbian center, a feminist school, arts workshops, a clothing exchange, and book exchange. This index had already expanded from the first list of services advertised in *Rat*, showing the growing engagement of stakeholders in the project. Many of these services never came to fruition, though firsthand accounts and video records confirm that childcare, clothing exchanges, and an informal food co-op did begin functioning.

Critical to the aspirations of this programming was not just the ability to serve the community, but also to legitimate a new kind of claim to the building—one not based on private ownership or allegiance to patriarchal legal structures, but rather on a collective right to space that could recognize and satisfy community needs. Though this set of needs was specific to these feminist squatters and their neighbors in the East Village, the act of squatting itself was a much broader challenge to “housing precarity, rampant property speculation and negative effects of urban redevelopment and regeneration” that echoed the imperatives of other squatting movements around the world.⁷³ Here, squatting was a political statement about women’s right to space. This, in turn, colored the language feminist-squatters used in the literature they distributed about the FSWB. “SISTERS,” read one of the first fliers, “THE BUILDING IS OURS / IT BELONGS TO ALL OF US / USE IT.”⁷⁴ From the outset, the women of the Fifth Street Building take-over were organizing building ‘ownership’ around needs, rather than financial investment. On the contrary, organizer Reeni Goldin succinctly alleged, the government was stockpiling

⁷³ Alexander Vasudevan, *The Autonomous City: A History of Urban Squatting* (London, New York: Verso, 2017), 10.

⁷⁴ Transcribed from an undated flier, which likely circulated in the first few days of the building occupation. The text on the flier was written in both English and Spanish.

“vacant buildings going for no use,” and wasting “city buildings when people need housing.”⁷⁵

Though fiercely independent in its programming and mission, the FSWB was connected to other movements protesting urban renewal and government neglect. Reeni Goldin, for example, was among the squatters involved in The Cooper Square Development Committee (CSDC)—an influential community planning organization that, under the leadership of activists Charles Abrams, Francis Goldin (Reeni’s mother), and Walter Thabit, among others, halted Robert Moses’ 1959 slum clearance plan in the Lower East Side.⁷⁶ By 1961, the CSDC published its own plan for the Lower East Side, which proposed more modest changes to the urban fabric and accounted for the current residences in the design of new, affordable housing units.⁷⁷ CSDC members embraced community planning practices, acknowledging and responding to residents’ resentment of city government officials who had cast them as “expendable pawns in the housing experiments of the intelligentsia.”⁷⁸

In addition to sharing some organizers with the CSDC, the FSWB squatters also shared the CSDC’s ethos of community planning and investment in systems of maintenance and repair. Whereas the CSDC channeled government funding into the restoration of tenement buildings under their 1961 “Alternate Plan for Cooper Square,”

⁷⁵ Cowan.

⁷⁶ Reeni Goldin’s mother Fran Goldin was one of the founding organizers of the Cooper Square Development Committee, and was one of the lesser known but critical individuals who contested Robert Moses’ redevelopment of the Lower East Side.

⁷⁷ The Cooper Square Development Committee Plan was co-signed by Jane Jacobs, perhaps the most famous adversary of Robert Moses and urban renewal in New York City during the 1950s and 1960s.

⁷⁸ Marci Reaven, “Neighborhood Activism in Planning for New York City, 1945-1975,” *Journal of Urban History* 46, no. 6 (2017): 1269.

however, the women of the FSWB took up maintenance as a radically independent project. Instead of seeking government funding, FSWB squatters solicited funding and materials from the community. Above all, they picked up the broom, hammer, and nail and taught themselves how to repair the building. Jane Lurie's film reflects the squatter's emphasis on learning construction and maintenance skills, showing women sweeping, removing rotting floorboards, and scraping flaking paint off the walls. As one of the film's narrator mentions, these projects were part of the ethos of the FSWB:

We saw the building as a school, a feminist school everything that had to be done there was a learning experience. How does a boiler work? What is a fuse? How many amps do we have? What about holes in the floor?⁷⁹

Among the squatters was Phyllis Birkby, a lesbian feminist activist and architect who graduated from Yale School of Architecture just five years prior to the FSWB takeover. A year after the FSWB had been demolished, Birkby joined forces with feminist, environmental practitioners Katrin Adam, Ellen Perry Berkeley, Bobbie Sue Hood, Marie Kennedy, Joan Forrester Sprague, and Leslie Kanes Weisman to start the Women's School of Planning and Architecture (WSPA), a two-week long, 24-hour school for women interested in environmental design fields.⁸⁰ Though the WSPA was a mobile community, taking up residency in Maine, California, Rhode Island, Colorado, and Washington D.C. over the course of six years, its interests in developing alternative educational models, contesting masculinist modes of working, and integrating women's

⁷⁹ The Fifth Street Women's Building Film, directed by Jane Lurie (c. 1973), Digital copy.

⁸⁰ At this time, environmental design did not specifically relate to environmental engineering or other vocations specifically addressing the natural environment. It was used as an umbrella term for professions related to the built environment: architecture, urban planning, construction, urban studies, etc.

values with space-praxis all echoed the imperatives set forth in the FSWB.⁸¹ Classes taught at the WSPA like “Demystification of Tools in Relation to Design,” “Professionalism Redefined,” and “Women and the Built Environment,” were feminist laboratories that built upon some of the foundational issues and ideas that Phyllis Birkby would’ve encountered first-hand in her experience at 330 E. 5th Street.

In the last week of the FSWB, the project’s future became increasingly uncertain. After hearing the squatters’ demands, the city government offered to let the women keep the building if they agreed to take in welfare women under government supervision. The women of the FSWB refused on the basis of the Welfare Department being too invasive in their constituents’ lives. Goldin summed up this position when she emphatically stated, “We’re not counting anybody’s socks, are you kidding me? We’re not gonna be their jailer.”⁸² This collapse in negotiation, if it could even be called that, resulted in the New York City Department of Real Estate’s paternalistic eviction of the squatters on the basis of “the building’s lack of heat, electricity and sanitary facilities” that were deemed hazardous to these women’s health.⁸³ Shortly after the eviction, the city razed the building and created surface parking for police vehicles, which still exists today. In a final statement published weeks after the FSWB was razed, organizers wrote their parting words:

Because we want to develop our own culture,
Because we want to overcome stereotypes,
Because we refuse to have ‘equal rights’ in a corrupt society,

⁸¹ Leslie Kanes Weisman and Noel Phyllis Birkby, “The Women’s School of Planning and Architecture,” in *Learning Our Way: Essays in Feminist Education* ed. Charlotte Bunch and Sandra Pollack (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1983), 227-228.

⁸² Adrian Shirk, “This Building is Yours,” *Catapult Magazine* online, September 25, 2015.

⁸³ “24 Arrested as Police End Feminist Demonstration,” *The New York Times* (January 14, 1971), 41.

Because we want to survive, grow, be ourselves...

We took over a building to put into action with women those things essential to women--healthcare, childcare, food conspiracy, clothing and book exchange, gimme women's shelter, a lesbian rights center, interarts center, feminist school, drug rehabilitation.

We know the city does not provide for us.
Now we know the city will not allow us to provide for ourselves. For this reason we were busted.
We were busted because we are women acting independently of men,
Independently of the system...
In other words, we are women being revolutionary.⁸⁴

Though the FSWB project had come to a close all-too-soon, its legacy lived in many forms: through Leslie Kane Weisman's article "Women's Environmental Rights: A Manifesto," published in the well-known issue of *Heresies* on women and architecture; through Labyris Books⁸⁵, a prominent feminist bookstore founded by FSWB co-conspirators Marizel Rios and Jane Lurie; and through the yet-to-come feminist take-over of 888 Memorial Drive in Cambridge, MA.

The Cambridge Women's Building

In February of 1971, a rag-tag team of socialist feminists set their sights on the former Hingham Knitting Company factory building for their new women's center. The two-story structure was home to the Harvard Graduate School of Design's Architectural Technology Workshop, a collaborative initiative between the Graduate School

⁸⁴ Leslie Kanes Weisman, "Women's Environmental Rights: A Manifesto," *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Arts & Politics* 3, no.3, issue 11 (1981), 7.

⁸⁵ Labyris books was a hub for lesbian feminists, and hosted talks by renowned author Audre Lorde, among other prominent figures in the movement. Interestingly, the phrase "the future is female," was coined by staff of the store. Labyris opened in 1972 and closed in 1977.

of Design (GSD) and the US Steel Corporation to explore new pedagogical approaches to the design of building structures.⁸⁶ During the International Women’s Day March in Boston, on March 6, 1971, a coalition of over 100 feminists from the Gay Women’s Liberation, Bread and Roses, the Old ‘Mole’ Women’s Caucus, the Child Care Action group, and a handful of women’s health collectives, diverged paths from the other protesters and headed towards the Architectural Technology Workshop at 888 Memorial Drive. After calling out words of solidarity to the women prisoners at the Charles Street Jail, they met 20 other women who had broken into 888 Memorial Drive earlier that day, and together they started transforming the building into a women’s center.⁸⁷

Like the Fifth Street Building take-over, the squat on 888 Memorial Drive was short lived—ending in the squatters’ tactical retreat from the building after ten days without heat. In his report to Harvard University President Nathan Marsh Pusey, GSD Dean Maurice D. Kilbridge bitterly summarized the impact of the take-over in impersonal terms:

Laboratory and model studies, which proceeded satisfactorily during the fall term, suffered a setback during the spring term through the women's occupation of the Technology Workshop. Not only was physical access to the workshop barred for about ten days, but six of the most productive weeks of the term were lost because of damage and destruction. Most of the models were destroyed, small tools and equipment stolen and the place left in shambles.⁸⁸

However, the legacy of the Cambridge women’s building take-over extends beyond the implications of this embittered summary; in fact, the squat spurred the purchase of 46

⁸⁶ Information found in summary of the Francis Loeb Library’s GSD History Collection, Administrative Affairs, Series B: Harvard University GSD, Administrative Affairs: External Relations, Subseries BA: News and Announcements, 1967-1968. Full folder of archival records was unavailable due to COVID-19.

⁸⁷ *On Our Way: The Cambridge Women’s Center Newsletter*, October 29, 1971.

⁸⁸ Official Registrar of Harvard University, “Report of the President of Harvard College and reports of departments 1970-1971,” 316.

Pleasant Street for a new Cambridge Women’s Center, which remains in operation today.⁸⁹

At the project’s conception squatters had grand visions for what could be accomplished at 888 Memorial Drive. The services they had begun to establish echoed those that were in development at the Fifth Street Women’s Building. As one woman described on local television, the burgeoning women’s center had: “free childcare, karate, dance, auto mechanics, medical and legal counseling, and space for a lesbian lounge, a large meeting room, a women’s crash pad, and special activities such as women’s and children’s parties.”⁹⁰ Because the building was fully operational before the take-over, the feminist squatters had little to do in the way of cleaning, though they did claim the space as their own by repurposing rooms and painting the facade with statements like “FREE ERICKA” and “THE GIRLS RUN IT.”⁹¹ Lesbian women were in large numbers in the building, and they laid claim to the edifice in both personal and public ways—by kissing on the stoop for local news channels to see, by coming out as gay, and by starting romantic relationships there.

The primary conspirators in the building take-over were members of Bread and Roses, a socialist feminist organization named for the slogan that women textile workers in Lawrence, MA adopted during their 1912 strike. Like the New England’s material feminists of that earlier era—Charlotte Perkins Gilmore, Melusina Fay Peirce, among

⁸⁹ The purchase was possible, in part, because of a \$5,000 donation given by Sue Lyman, a chair of the Board of Trustees at Radcliffe college who admired the feminists’ project.

⁹⁰ Boston TV NewsDigital Library, WHDH News, “Women’s Lib,” March 14, 1971.

http://bostonlocaltv.org/catalog/BPL_5JV63HLNA0VJS1A

⁹¹ “FREE ERICKA” refers to Ericka Huggins, a Black Panther who, at the time, was on trial in New Haven for conspiracy to murder Alex Rackley. During the trial Huggins became a national icon in many New Left movements, including the radical feminist movement.

others—members of Bread and Roses believed in socializing domestic work and finding communal alternatives for childcare.⁹² Unlike their predecessors, Bread and Roses women had very radical ideas about abolishing “the family as an economic unit and the only socially sanctioned living unit of society,” and becoming an interracial organization.⁹³ According to sociologist and historian Winifred Breines, though Bread and Roses women wanted to incorporate Black women into their movement, and even “intellectually recognized class and race as barriers to feminist solidarity,” they were not “fully aware that their politics were unwelcoming, even irrelevant to African-American women,” or “that their middle-class whiteness infected their politics as profoundly as race did black women’s politics.”⁹⁴ The fact that few women of color participated in the take-over of 888 Memorial Drive was just one effect of this racial fracturing between women in New Left movements. It also affected how these white, socialist women interacted with the community—particularly as they knowingly walked into an ongoing, tense negotiation between Harvard University and the Riverside Planning Committee.

Led by community organizer Sandra Graham, who would later be the first Black woman elected to Cambridge City Council, the Riverside Planning Committee (RPC) was a coalition of primarily African American families in Cambridge’s Riverside neighborhood fighting to defend their access to housing. In their drive for real estate acquisition and the expansion of campus housing options, Harvard had displaced many

⁹² The histories of Charlotte Perkins Gilmore, Melusina Fay Peirce, among other material feminists and their approaches to communitarian spatial design are explored in Dolores Hayden’s book *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (1981).

⁹³ Winifred Breines, *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Accessed online, no page number.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Black families from their homes. In 1970, the RPC demanded that Harvard abandon their plan to build student housing on the university-owned Treeland site, and instead develop housing for low-income families. The Architectural Technology Workshop was one of several buildings on the Treeland parcel, and was slated for demolition regardless of whether Harvard moved forward with student housing or the RPC's plan. In the confusion of the first few days of the building take over, some members of the Riverside community expressed support for the women, even bringing them food and basic supplies. However, as historian Carson Bear notes, some members of the RPC were skeptical of the take-over, and "grew worried that the university would refuse to develop the low-income housing on 888 Memorial Drive."⁹⁵

Graham met with the women of 888 Memorial Drive early on in the building take-over. The fallout of this meeting garnered confusingly different expressions of solidarity. On the one hand, the feminist squatters were quick to claim coordination with the RPC and even updated their list of demands:

That Harvard build low-income housing on this, the Treeland Site, in accordance with the demands of the Riverside Community. That Harvard provide a women's center to serve the needs of women of the Boston area.

That Harvard give us full use of this building, with full facilities (heat, plumbing, electricity, etc.), until it is necessary to tear it down in order to break ground for the Riverside low-income housing.⁹⁶

In a statement given on televised news, one feminist was quick to delegitimize what she called the "bull shit rolling around about how we've hurt the Riverside community's negotiations with Harvard," claiming that Harvard was working to pit the

⁹⁵ Carson Bear, "The Historic Harvard Campus Building That Once Housed a Feminist Takeover." *National Trust for Historic Preservation* online, January 19, 2018.

⁹⁶ Demands quoted in an article by Katherine L. Day, "Women's Group Seizes Harvard Building," *The Harvard Crimson*, March 8, 1971.

RPC against the feminist squatters.⁹⁷ But in a press conference that took place shortly after the take-over of 888 Memorial Drive, Graham's own expression of solidarity on behalf of the Riverside Community was much less enthusiastic. When a reporter asked her "So you're in sympathy with the demands, but you are not officially supporting them, is that right?" Graham affirmed, "That's right."⁹⁸

Though the relationship between Graham and leaders in the 888 Memorial Drive take-over has been anecdotally characterized as mutually enthusiastic, the historical record reveals a disjuncture between how the predominantly white women of 888 Memorial Drive saw this cross-organizational cooperation vis-à-vis Graham's and Riverside community members' experience (or non-experience) of it. As Winifred Breines discusses in her history of the Bread and Roses, white socialist women who were eager for an interracial movement were also quick to cling on to, and advertise, idealisms and universalisms which were out of step with lived realities, particularly as they related to the lived experience of Black women.⁹⁹

Ultimately, this split between organizations and individuals did not mean that the goals and ambitions of the socialist feminists and the Riverside community were completely dissimilar. While there were obvious, material reasons to target 888 Memorial Drive for the women's center—it was a spacious, historic structure that easily suited the group's needs—there choice was also symbolic: "we didn't destroy Harvard," two co-conspirators recalled, "but we launched an attack on this microcosm of white amerikan

⁹⁷ Boston TV News Digital Library, WHDH News, "Women's Lib. and Louise Bryn," (c. 1971). http://bostonlocaltv.org/catalog/BPL_5JV63HLNA0VJS1A

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Nevertheless, in the years that followed Sandra Graham served as a formal advisor to the Women's Center in its latter, permanent home at 46 Pleasant Street.

male power.”¹⁰⁰ This kind of contestation of institutional power, whether that power manifested itself in whiteness or the patriarchy, echoed the spirit of the RPC’s protests against the University during the 1970 graduation ceremonies, during which Graham grabbed the microphone from a Harvard official and exclaimed “You take us out bodily, that’s the only way you’re getting us out of here.”¹⁰¹ For both the women of 888 Memorial Drive and the RPC, broader campaigns for power and representation expressed themselves in this very public struggle over space. Buildings—whether they were community centers or houses—were not merely pawns in a game of chess, but were critical infrastructures that allowed for the knitting of social bonds and the fight against discrimination of all kinds.

In the months following the experiment at 888 Memorial Drive, a small group of organizers shared office space with the Mass Lawyers Guild and Women’s Law Commune while they waited for the acquisition of their new home, at 46 Pleasant Street, to be completed. The new space was at first called the Women’s Educational Center, later the Cambridge Women’s Center (CWC), and it would open its doors to a broader cross-section of women in Cambridge. Though not particularly expensive at \$28,000, the 110-year old house they purchased required updates and near constant maintenance. From the very beginning, women worked to make the building ADA compliant, added meeting rooms, and converted the basement into office space. Even in legal documents like the 1986 Capital Improvements Plan for the CWC, a report which Jean Rioux and Judith

¹⁰⁰ *On Our Way: The Cambridge Women’s Center Newsletter*, March 7, 1972.

¹⁰¹ Robert Reinhold, “Tradition Falls at Harvard as Women Join Men at Graduation Rites,” *The New York Times*, June 12, 1970.

Norris began with the claim “Space is finite, but what to do with it is not,” space-praxis was always portrayed as a deeply optimistic undertaking.¹⁰²

In the first years of the center, Bread and Roses folded and the constituency of the new Women’s Center dwindled, with meetings sometimes held amongst only four women.¹⁰³ However the constituency expanded in the mid-1970s as the center embarked on and supported community-based projects like the Women’s School; the Transition House, a homeless shelter; and the Rape Crisis Center. Among the groups that convened at the CWC was the Combahee River Collective, a renowned group of Black feminist intellectuals and grassroots organizers. Splintering off from the National Black Feminist Organization, the Combahee River Collective members began organizing consciousness-raising groups in the CWC. As Combahee member Demita Frazier recalls in an interview with historian Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, core members of the Combahee River Collective “were accumulating a lot of data from” hundreds of “Black women in the diaspora” during these sessions. This “data,” as Frazier called it, inspired the members of the collective to pen “The Combahee River Collective Statement” in 1977, a now famous document that spoke to the intersection of racial, sexual, gender, and class-based oppression.¹⁰⁴

Over the lifespan of the Cambridge Women’s Center, cross-movement cooperation between Black feminists and white, socialist feminists endured and matured. As Combahee River Collective leader Barbara Smith remembered it, many of these white

¹⁰² Northeastern University Archives and Special Collections, “Women’s Educational Center (Cambridge, Mass.) records,” Identifier: M047, Box 9, Folder 237, “Capital Improvements Plan.”

¹⁰³ *On Our Way: The Cambridge Women’s Center Newsletter*, April 1973.

¹⁰⁴ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2017), digital version - page not provided.

socialists “understood that you could not really deal with sexism and the exploitation of women if you didn’t look at capitalism and also racism.”¹⁰⁵ And yet, missteps and miscalculations were frequently made by white feminists in the process of organizing across racial lines. Today, the Cambridge Women’s Center models a more sophisticated, intersectional approach to providing services for a diverse coalition of women organizing across racial, sexual, ethnic, and class lines.¹⁰⁶

The Los Angeles Woman’s Building

It was a house large enough for everyone, all women, we claimed. It was Womanspace, Womanhouse, and the House of Women, “At Home,” Everywoman’s space, and Femme/Maison. It was female space, safe space, sacred space, contested space, occupied space, appropriated space, and trans-formed space. It was revolution and revelation. We were squatters and proprietors, renegades and healers; we dichotomized and fused. We had one commonality: we were convinced that we were transforming culture by offering alternatives, as women, not only in the arts and culture, but also in the way we used space and conducted politics in that space.¹⁰⁷

In her above reflection, anthropologist Sondra Hale captures the spatial and political legacy of the Los Angeles Woman’s Building, the “off-center center” of feminist arts and activism from 1973 to 1991.¹⁰⁸ Founded by artists Judy Chicago and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, and art historian Arlene Raven, the Woman’s Building emerged

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ According to a report published by the Cambridge Women’s Center in 2019 that was based on data collected from 88 members, 40% of women affiliated with the CWC are women of color, 49% are LGBTQ+, 62% are trauma survivors, and 69% rely on income assistance.

¹⁰⁷ Sondra Hale, “Power and Space: Feminist Culture and the Los Angeles Woman’s Building, A Context,” in *From Site to Vision: the Woman’s Building in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Meg Linton, Sue Maberry, and Elizabeth Pulsinelli (Los Angeles, CA: Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design, 2011).

¹⁰⁸ Lucy R. Lippard, “Foreword: Going Around in Circles,” in *From Site to Vision: the Woman’s Building in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Meg Linton, Sue Maberry, and Elizabeth Pulsinelli (Los Angeles, CA: Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design, 2011), 12.

out of a milieu of women's centers, including those described in this chapter, and an insurgence of feminist activism in California's art scene at the dawn of the 1970s. In the inaugural year of that decade, Chicago founded the first feminist arts program in the U.S. at California State University, Fresno, moving the program to the California Institute of Arts (CalArts) only a year later. Borrowing from the popular feminist practice of consciousness-raising—in which women typically gathered in small groups to talk about their experiences of gender-based oppression—Chicago began her classes by unearthing “emotionally charged issues” facing her students, “including ambition, money, relationships with parents and lovers, body-image, and sexuality,” which in turn inspired the artistic production of the group.¹⁰⁹ One of the most famous outputs of the program was *Womanhouse*, a collaborative installation between Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and the students of the feminist arts program which transformed an abandoned Hollywood mansion into a site of feminist artistic expression, exploring themes like domestic servitude and menstruation.¹¹⁰

Frustrated with institutional oversight at CalArts, Chicago teamed up with de Bretteville and Raven to establish an independent feminist arts program, the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW). Though the FSW initially held classes in de Bretteville's living room, it quickly began looking for a more permanent space to grow its community. Los Angeles was the logical city of choice for this new feminist arts community center, as it was already home to feminist art institutions like *Womanspace*. Formed in the wake of

¹⁰⁹ Laura Meyer, “The Los Angeles Woman's Building and the Feminist Art Community, 1973-1991,” in *The Sons and Daughters of Los: Culture and Community in L.A.*, ed. David E. James (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 41.

¹¹⁰ For more on *Womanhouse*, see Chapter 2, “Self-Help as Space-Praxis: The (Un) Making of Clinical Space at the Feminist Women's Health Centers,” subsection “The clinic: self-help as space-praxis.”

feminist protests against the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—which had, over the course of presenting eighty-one one-person exhibitions in the preceding decade, featured the work of only one woman—Womanspace moved into an old laundromat in Culver City in 1973, and dedicated itself to showing women’s artwork.¹¹¹ Serving as a model for the future Woman’s Building, Womanspace blurred the lines between feminism, activism, and artistic production. For the gallery’s organizers and patrons, claiming urban space was both a practical and political act.

On November 28, 1973, the Woman’s Building opened in its first location at 743 South Grandview Avenue, two blocks away from the Westlake neighborhood’s MacArthur Park. The purchased building formerly housed the Chouinard Art Institute, a space where Disney animators frequented evening drawing classes in the 1930s, and artists including Ed Ruscha and Robert Irwin trained in the mid-20th century.¹¹² Though it still possessed its signature, double-height atrium, the abandoned edifice had fallen into disrepair by the time Chicago, de Bretteville, and Raven purchased it. *One Los Angeles Times* columnist remarked of the building’s state:

Only the most charitable eyes would have seen potential in the massive, two-story concrete building that had once housed the Chouinard Art School... But the Los Angeles feminist community, outgrowing existing women’s galleries, sensed a certain graceful charm under the grime and neglect.¹¹³

Like at the Fifth Street Women’s Building, building maintenance was taken on as a communal project at the L.A. Woman’s Building. With pink tools in hand¹¹⁴, hundreds of

¹¹¹ Terry Wolverton, “Introduction,” in *From Site to Vision: the Woman’s Building in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Meg Linton, Sue Maberry, and Elizabeth Pulsinelli (Los Angeles, CA: Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design, 2011), 20.

¹¹² Richard Neupert, “Teaching Disney’s animators,” *Film History* 11, no. 1 (1999), 77.

¹¹³ Cheryl Bentsen, “A Renaissance in Residence at Old Chouinard,” *The Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 1972, p. 65.

¹¹⁴ Lippard, 11.

women gathered in the months leading up to the building's official opening to "build walls, scrape and paint ceilings, sand floors, move furniture and printing presses, paint signage, and generally prepare the space to welcome the community."¹¹⁵ The material process of repairing the former Chouinard Building was integral to the women's broader political project of repairing the sexist art world. To paraphrase Sondra Hale, feminists engaging in space-praxis at 743 S. Grandview Ave. viewed themselves as both squatters, appropriating space to political ends, and healers, resuscitating and reimagining broken systems and places from states of ruination. Their sense of ownership over the space was formed collectively, by and through the process of building reconstruction.

Remediating the new Woman's Building on South Grandview Avenue was also an essential component of feminist efforts to shape new pedagogical approaches to artistic and spatial praxis. In her book *By Our Own Hands*, Woman's Building affiliated artist Faith Wilding formulated four principles for art education: that women should practice consciousness-raising, identify and uplift female role models, make art based on their personal experiences, and build female contexts and environments in which artistic production could take place.¹¹⁶ While the first three tenets more directly related to women's artistic practices, the final tenet expressed a unique interest in the spatial milieu in which feminist art could be made. The Woman's Building was one such example of a feminist environment, holding space for women-led and women-centered institutions, including Womanspace, which moved into the building from its former Culver City

¹¹⁵ Wolverton, 23.

¹¹⁶ Faith Wilding, *By Our Own Hands: The Woman Artist's Movement, Southern California 1970–1976* (Santa Monica, CA: Double X, 1977), 10-11; Later, Wilding added two more principles to the abovementioned list: that feminist artists should engage in collaborative and collective work, and that they should explode the hierarchies of high/low art, and recover marginalized artistic practices in turn.

location, the Grandview and 707 galleries, the Feminist Studio Workshop, the Center for Feminist Art Historical Studies, Sisterhood Bookstore, and Womantours, a feminist travel agency. Making space, and maintaining it for feminist purposes, not only allowed artistic production to occur, but it was also a mode of artistic production in and of itself. As arts education programs in the Woman's Building developed in the years following its opening, feminists continued to offer and take courses like "Advanced Electrical Skills," taught by the all-woman contracting collective Wonder Woman Electric, "Building Skills" with Cheryl Swannack, and "Basic Electricity" with Edna Myers. Another popular course, "Construction at the Building," invited women into the process of making ongoing repairs to the Woman's Building.¹¹⁷

When the Woman's Building was forced to move to its second and final location at 1727 N. Spring Street in 1975, women involved with the renovation of 743 S. Grandview St were back to sweeping floors, fixing building systems, and painting walls. Many organizations in the former Chouinard building decided against making the move to a more industrial neighborhood, in part because it promised less foot traffic for galleries. In their stead, new institutions like the Women's Graphic Center, L.A. Women's Switchboard, Chrysalis Magazine, and Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) took root in the three-story, eighteen thousand square foot space.

Debates about whether the Woman's Building was a separatist organization, made to preserve and protect women's culture, or an out-ward-facing organization, designed to ally itself with external activist efforts, often raged amongst feminists inhabiting the space. In order to continue operations, part of the daily work of the Woman's Building's

¹¹⁷ Courses included in a Woman's Building-published pamphlet titled "the Extension Program at the Woman's Building. Spring Session. April 19-June 14, 1976."

patrons was to negotiate these polarities, designing a “political and cultural bridge between public and private life.”¹¹⁸ Co-founder Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, like many others in the Woman’s Building, was interested in situating the ongoing work at the Woman’s Building in a broader spatial, cultural, and political context. For de Bretteville, the Woman’s Building, could be personified as a woman reaching out and embracing communities across Los Angeles, rather than an individual turning her back on the outside world.¹¹⁹ In her Feminist Studio Work-shop course, de Bretteville worked with her students to map their respective emotional connections to space throughout Los Angeles. An iteration of the project resulted in a series of posters capturing how students would alter L.A.’s urban fabric, and one student’s work was displayed in city buses.¹²⁰

If pedagogical exercises practiced in the Feminist Studio Workshop blurred the boundary between the worlds inside and outside of the Woman’s Building, performance art often rendered those borderlines illegible. From the beginnings of the institution, the Woman’s Building was home to myriad feminist performance art groups, including Mother Art, the Feminist Art Workers, The Waitresses, Sisters of Survival, the Lesbian Art Project, and Ariadne: A Social Art Network. Founded by Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, Ariadne was a politically engaged arts organization interested in “‘hijacking’ ... mass print and electronic media in order to mobilize institutional power” to address issues of sexual violence against women.¹²¹ One project executed by the group was *Three Weeks in May*, a multimedia, multi-sited project that Lacy organized on

¹¹⁸ Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: the Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 223.

¹¹⁹ Meyer, 40.

¹²⁰ Meyer, 46-47.

¹²¹ Vivian Green Fryd, “Suzanne Lacy’s Three Weeks in May: Feminist Activist Performance as ‘Expanded Public Pedagogy.’” *NWSA* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2007), 23.

Mother's Day of 1977. Lacy began her work by pasting two large scale maps of Los Angeles in a plaza adjacent to L.A. City Hall. Collecting data on acts of sexual violence from the L.A. Police Department each day, she stamped the locations of rapes onto the first map for 21 straight days, making more marks in fainter ink to represent the large percentage of rapes that were not reported. On the other map, a counter-map of resistance, Lacy marked the location of rape hotlines, rape crisis and counseling centers, and hospital emergency rooms. Over the three weeks that the maps hung in Downtown Los Angeles, rape hotline activists, elected city officials, artists, and police department members held press conferences, talked on radio shows, and were interviewed for newspaper articles about rape and sexual violence in the city. In the end, millions of men and women had been exposed to Lacy's work either in newspapers or on local news broadcasting.¹²²

Performance art at the Woman's Building, like that of Ariadne, extended beyond the edifice's four walls, bringing feminist political ambitions into the public sphere. As art critic Lucy Lippard has stated, space was a "precious commodity in an era when alternative institutions were every activist's goal," and so it was no coincidence that performance art, what Lippard has defined as "action within and transforming space, and by extension society," was a popular mode of artistic production amongst feminist activists in and beyond the Woman's Building.¹²³ While issues facing white women—like misogyny in the workplace, sexual assault, and conscription to the role of housewife—were the frequent subject matter of performative and other artistic expression, issues of race were less frequently on the table. Ironically, while

¹²² Hayden, 223.

¹²³ Lippard, 13.

multidimensional moments of feminist, anti-racist, and queer organizing happened in the very early 1970s in the case of the Women's Liberation Center and the Fifth Street Women's Building, and many other so-called women's centers, the L.A. Woman's Building did not engage in efforts to meaningfully represent more women of color in gallery programming until the 1980s. In the last decade of its existence, feminists at the Woman's Building opened their doors to the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES)¹²⁴; featured the work of Chicana artists and writers in the exhibitions *Madre Tierra* (1983), *Viva La Vida* (1987), and *El Dia de Los Muertos* (1990); and presented the work of other women of color artists and authors like Michelle T. Clinton, Linda Nishio, and Linda Vallejo in the 1986 exhibition *Cross-Pollination*.

Though more diverse representation was achieved in the building's exhibition spaces during its last decade of existence, the rank and file membership of the Woman's Building remained largely white and middle class. In recalling members' efforts to reach out to women of color artists, Terry Wolverton reflects:

what they really wanted was a woman of color to come in and really just be a part of the spirit and the vision of the Building as it existed. But the trouble was that...probably any woman of color—would have had a slightly different version and a different agenda of what the Building would, could or should be.¹²⁵

Struggles for representation at the Woman's Building were often superseded by an active safeguarding of feminist principles shaped by and through white privilege. These

¹²⁴ The Woman's Building was briefly placed under FBI surveillance when they rented office space to the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), a grassroots organization founded in 1980 that continues to campaign against U.S. government and corporate intervention in the El Salvadoran government and economy.

¹²⁵ Michelle Moravec and Sondra Hale, "'At Home' At the Woman's Building (But Who Gets a Room of Her Own?): Women of Color and Community," in *From Site to Vision: the Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Meg Linton, Sue Maberry, and Elizabeth Pulsinelli (Los Angeles, CA: Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design, 2011), 171.

principles promoted values of insularity, separatism, and privacy—values that seemed, and sometimes were, necessary to generate work in a sexist world, but that, in the long-term, negatively affected the capacity for feminists to nourish a truly anti-racist, feminist institution. In its best moments, however, the Woman’s Building espoused a more generous, outward-facing feminist space-praxis—one that, if exercised in full, could gesture towards an intersectional politics of design.

Reflections on the Archive

The notion of intersectional space-praxis, like the notion of intersectional politics, is not new, even if it has gone by other names in the past. As Roderick Ferguson suggests in *One-Dimensional Queer*, it is critical that we mine the historical archives of coalitional, political solidarity as we consider how feminist, queer, and anti-racist movements might link arms against some of the most sinister issues that face us today, like police violence, mass incarceration, eviction and housing scarcity, the gutting of federally funded social services, and the privatization of public space. None of the five women’s buildings projects described in this chapter represent perfect, spatial instantiations of anti-racist feminist institutions. In fact, all of them activists who founded these spaces, save for the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, were considerably shaped by the institution of white privilege. This chapter proposes that feminist spatial practitioners today must learn from the political errors of 1970s gender-based activism, while still attending to the most impactful, meaningful aspects of feminist space-praxis in that era.

One of the threads that ties these five, distinct women's buildings together is their respective emphasis on the making of architectural commons. How could building 'ownership' be redefined collectively, within (and against) the existing capitalist real estate market? Could cleaning up, renovating, squatting in, and inhabiting buildings be considered a pedagogical act as well as a political one? If so, what was at stake in learning through collaborative space-praxis? Women involved in the making of women's centers debated these questions on theoretical terms, but they also tested them out spatially and materially. Claiming, appropriating, and redesigning space were key to the making, and remaking, of more egalitarian life-worlds, where women could nourish the kind of communitarian culture that had been squeezed out of mainstream culture. Like grass growing in pavement cracks, women's centers all over the country emerged in abandoned buildings and ruptured zones of the urban landscape, manifesting alternative methods of inhabiting space that contested prevailing notions of kinship and property. Many centers, like the STAR House, Fifth Street Women's Building, and Women's Liberation Center were stomped out quickly, while a few, like the Los Angeles Woman's Building and Cambridge Women's Center continued to grow and evolve for decades.

One of the fundamental issues that haunted women's building activists was the question of whether they should be crafting separatist or outward-facing institutions. Were the walls of the women's building meant to be fortified or made porous? Were women's building administrators protecting and insulating women's culture? Or were they tasked with building bridges to anti-racist, anti-poverty, and anti-homophobic movements? In making the STAR House, Rivera and Johnson took a deliberately extraverted approach to space-praxis, opening their doors to neighborhood poor and

working class youth and giving them sustenance and shelter. Other institutions, like the Fifth Street Women's Building, answered these questions in conflicting ways. On the one hand, feminists at the Fifth Street Women's Building invited neighborhood women into their space, and built ties with other, not explicitly feminist, Lower East Side institutions like the Cooper Square Development Committee. On the other hand, they refused city government assistance, deciding to give up the Fifth Street Women's Building instead of becoming complicit in what they viewed as an unethical welfare system in New York City. The question of who to include in feminist space-making projects, and on what grounds, was, and remains, highly contested.

In her article "Maintenance and Care," anthropologist Shannon Mattern makes a case that systems of maintenance might serve as a counterpoint to contemporary, insatiable calls for innovation and newness. Quoting, Steven Jackson's famous essay "Rethinking Repair," Mattern asks her readers to take "erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather than novelty, growth, and progress," as starting points for space-praxis.¹²⁶ At the women's buildings described in this chapter, erosion, breakdown, and decay not only describe many of the buildings that feminists attempted to mend, but also the social systems they sought to reimagine. Proposals for communal childcare, cooking, healthcare, and education did not exist in a vacuum, but rather came in direct response to the disintegration of socialized system of care in the U.S. That it was women, trans* folks, and poor people of color mending these gaping holes, restitching the seams of a tattered social fabric will likely come as no surprise to the reader. In making a case for the importance of these care practices, the intention here is not to reify women's

¹²⁶ Steven Jackson quoted in Shannon Mattern, "Maintenance and Care," *Places Journal*, November 2018. Accessed online: https://placesjournal.org/article/maintenance-and-care/#ref_41.

historical position as maintenance laborers, tasked with repairing our spatial and social infrastructures, but rather to advocate for a meaningful socialization of systems of maintenance and repair, in which we might all be compelled to sweep the floor, paint the walls, and mend the leaky pipes of our ailing world.

Chapter 2.

Self-Help as Space-Praxis: The (Un)Making of Clinical Space at the Feminist Women's Health Centers

On April 7, 1971, feminist activist Carol Downer mounted a table at Everywoman's Bookstore in Los Angeles and performed a pelvic self-examination in front of a group of two dozen women. Frustrated with mainstream feminist groups like the National Organization for Women (NOW), and their narrow focus on workplace discrimination, Downer shifted her attention to the body as a site of political action. Indeed, with the help of a speculum, Carol Hanisch's now infamous adage "the personal is political," manifested itself in her performance—marking the origins of the self-help women's health movement.¹²⁷ In the years that followed this event, Carol Downer would team up with Lorraine Rothman and other feminist activists to develop their vision of a feminist health system free from gubernatorial control and the patriarchal machinations of private industry. While their movement required political organizing and social exchange, it uniquely featured a commitment to the built environment as a medium for activism. The self-help clinic became a site of feminist space-praxis, where technological and architectural design processes were reimagined through, and alongside, the political

¹²⁷ Carol Hanisch, "The Personal is Political," in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Barbara A. Crow (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 113.

aspirations of self-professed “wild-eyed” feminist radicals “crusading for women’s liberation.”¹²⁸

This chapter examines the early years of the Federation of Feminist Women’s Health Centers (FFWHCs), focusing primarily on the Los Angeles Feminist Women’s Health Center (FWHC), founded by Carol Downer and Lorraine Rothman, and touching in brief on a few other FWHCs across California. At its height, the FFWHC included clinics in cities across the United States of America, among them Los Angeles, Orange County, Oakland, Chico, Redding, Sacramento, Tallahassee, Detroit, and Atlanta. Today, though the federation has dissolved, three FWHCs remain in California under the moniker Women’s Health Specialists of California, as does the FWHC in Atlanta. Though the whole historical arc of the FFWHC is of great interest, and has yet to be cohesively chronicled, this chapter focuses on the foundational years of these clinics, in the early 1970s, because this era marked the rise of a rebellious, feminist health movement in the United States. It was during this time, prior to *Roe v. Wade*, that women organized to provide safe, illegal abortions all across the country. The period also saw the founding of the first feminist health clinics in the country, spaces that were redesigned to facilitate self-help practices—which promoted women’s health education, DIY pelvic self-examinations, the self-management of menstruation, and small group-administered abortions. The chapter also briefly revisits the FWHCs during the mid-1980s to early 1990s, when anti-abortion sentiments gained traction amongst the so-called Moral Majority that voted Ronald Reagan into the office of the presidency.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Carol Downer, “Covert Sex Discrimination Against Women as Medical Patients,” (address, American Psychological Association conference, Honolulu, Hawaii, September 5, 1972).

¹²⁹ The Moral Majority was a conservative political organization founded in 1979 by Baptist minister Jerry Falwell Sr. The coalition’s mostly Christian members promoted traditional family

Rather than reading self-help clinics as incidental, spatial milieu surrounding a political movement, these radical health centers should be understood as testing grounds for a material manifestation of feminist modes of collective living and working. Never merely a backdrop for feminist-clinicians' work, the Feminist Women's Health Centers were in themselves articulations of a feminist politics. This chapter argues that the relationship between feminist lay-clinicians and their material environments is best understood through Karen Barad's neologism 'intra-action,' a term she defines as ...the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual 'interaction,' which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the 'distinct' agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements.¹³⁰

Though Barad has developed the term 'intra-action' in the intellectual ecologies of her own fields of practice—quantum physics and feminist philosophy—she also offers architects and designers a radical framework for reconceptualizing design practice. Understood through the process of intra-action, FWHC activist-clinicians, their political ideals, and their environmental realities should not be seen as distinct in the absolute sense. Rather they existed, and were enacted, synchronously. These activists understood that which the clinic contained—technologies, bodies, space—to exist in messy

values, prayer in school, and Christian conservative politicians like Ronald Reagan, while they advocated against abortion rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and the Equal Rights Amendment.

¹³⁰ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 33.

relationality, rather than an ordered hierarchy. All matter mattered in the reimagining of health practices.

While these clinics provided some of the same gynecological services as hospitals, their design was markedly different. FWHCs were always in a state of flux, aggregating, handing out, and disposing of couches, speculums, bacteria, mason jars, informational pamphlets, and menstrual blood. While hospitals coded the relationship between doctors and patients, FWHC architecture was comprised of bodies, gadgets, and space coming into being together. Activists saw the reorganization of space as complementary to the reconceptualization of their political agendas, and likewise, buildings offered health workers new potentials for their activism. Due to the Feminist Women's Health Centers' innate resistance to formal modes of architectural representation, this chapter relies on piecing together episodic photographs taken on disposable cameras, pamphlet illustrations, and first-hand accounts to capture the messy, "generated and generative" processes of making self-help spaces and technologies.¹³¹ The frequent assessment of such evidence as marginal within architectural discourses has, of course, a gendered subtext. This chapter is as much about broadening our notions of 'Archive' as it is about broadening our notions of 'Architecture.'

Origins: of Yeast and Yogurt

The Feminist Women's Health Center in Los Angeles, and the self-help movement at large, emerged in reaction to the proliferation of U.S. federal and state-sponsored family planning services for women. Though this government funding

¹³¹ Barad, 137.

increased the availability of birth control, allowing many women to more effectively manage their reproductive system, it also led to what historian Michelle Murphy has called a “‘gold rush’ of cheap mass-produced hormonal pharmaceuticals,” faulty contraceptive devices, and the rise of federally subsidized sterilization procedures carried out in U.S. and Puerto Rican hospitals, for which medical centers targeted primarily Black, Latinx, and indigenous women as patients.¹³² With one of the densest aggregations of family planning services in the U.S., Los Angeles was both a stronghold of state-sponsored control over women’s bodies, and a fertile ground for feminist counter-cultural health activism.¹³³ Chicana feminists in L.A., for instance, resisted the prevailing medical system on legal grounds in the 1974 *Madrigal v. Quilligan* case, suing the Los Angeles County Medical Center for sterilizing Mexican, immigrant women without their consent.¹³⁴

Against the grain of state-sponsored population control, feminist self-helpers claimed autonomy over their own bodies and reproductive health, founding self-help clinics as new sites of alternative medical practice. These self-help clinics existed in a milieu of insurgent health centers, including the Black Panther Party’s Bunchy Carter Free Medical Clinic, which addressed, among other things, Sickle Cell Anemia, a disease particular to African American communities, and the United Farm Workers’ health clinic, which attended to the health needs of largely Latinx migrant workers. Though each of

¹³² Michelle Murphy, *Seizing the Means of Reproduction: Entanglements of Feminism, Health, and Technoscience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 54.

¹³³ Joy Dryfoos, “Planning Family Planning in Eight Metropolitan Areas,” *Family Planning Perspectives* 3, no. 1 (January, 1971), 12.

¹³⁴ Elena R. Gutiérrez, “Policing “Pregnant Pilgrims”: Situating the Sterilization Abuse of Mexican-Origin Women in Los Angeles County” in *Women, Health, and Nation: Canada and the United States since 1945*, ed. Georgina Feldberg, Molly Ladd-Taylor, Alison Li, and Kathryn McPherson (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), 391-394.

these projects served different communities in Los Angeles, they were connected in their contestation of unjust state-sanctioned regimes of health.

The first two years of the Los Angeles FWHC saw several confrontations with government actors, including a prolonged legal battle with the State of California. After nine months of surveilling the Feminist Women's Health Center at 746 South Crenshaw Boulevard, ten police entered the clinic on September 20, 1972 to commence their "gynecological treasure hunt"—gathering everything from speculums, syringes, cannulas, and birth control pills to a pie tin, a measuring cup, and a carton of strawberry yogurt.¹³⁵ Based on the police findings, FWHC employee Colleen Wilson was charged with eleven different offenses relating to the practice of gynecology without a medical license, ultimately pleading guilty and paying a \$250 fine as well as serving two years of probation. The co-founder of the center Carol Downer, however, was charged on only two counts. First, she had assisted a woman in viewing her own cervix, and second, she had recommended the application of yogurt to the vaginal wall for the treatment of a yeast infection. In the following months that Downer fought the charges in court, feminist writer Stephanie Caruana facetiously termed the event the "great yogurt conspiracy" in the Washington D.C. based feminist zine *Off Our Backs*, a name that captured the feminist perspective of the case as an orchestrated hoax.

Though construed by government-appointed Special Investigator John Ursoe as an infringement on professionalized medical practice, Downer's recommendation of yogurt as a remedy for a yeast infection echoed a very common exercise of at-home self-care—the use of lactobacillus as an antidote to candida yeast overgrowth was just one of

¹³⁵ Stephanie Caruana, "great yogurt conspiracy," *Off Our Backs* 3, no.5 (1973), 7.

the many ways women across the U.S. used what was immediately available to them to manage their vaginal microbiome and reproductive health. Herbal remedies, vaginal sponges, douches, pessaries, and other methods of vaginal self-care had long been passed down from generation to generation of American women; these traditions were particularly strong amongst immigrant communities, African American communities, and other populations with decreased access to institutionalized medical care.¹³⁶ But the underlying assumption of the trial was based on physiological property—reinscribing the woman’s body as the object of professionalized gynecological study, thereby subject to the jurisdiction of state-enforced medical control. Put otherwise, under the discretion of the state, the domestic and medical domains of influence were to remain separate, a distinction that echoed the long-standing, patriarchal distinction between private and public spheres. The prosecutorial rhetoric of the proceedings was fueled by similarly binary questions lurking beneath the surface of the case: was yogurt a drug or a home remedy? Was Downer, or any lay-clinician for that matter, a friend giving another woman advice or a quack doctor? Were these clinics community centers or medical facilities?

In court reports, the clinic building was a particular curiosity, cast as an ambiguous space hiding illegal activity behind its shuttered facade. One prosecution witness, Sharon Dalton, opened her testimony with a distinctly spatial description of her trip to the Los Angeles FWHC:

...I entered 1027 South Crenshaw Blvd., L.A. at approx. 12:15p.m. this day, April 28, 1972. The walls were covered with posters relating to the women’s liberation movement... There was a girl sitting behind the desk in the second room talking to two other young teenagers. She asked if she could help me and I said I wanted information about a pregnancy test. She sent me into a

¹³⁶ Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 75.

room in the back of the building... There were numerous medical instruments, and rubber gloves setting [Sic] around.¹³⁷

Similarly, in her observations of the LA FWHC, police woman Carol Chouinard foregrounded observations about the clinic interior—linking self-help practices with their spaces:

...Two students volunteered to be ‘gang pelvic-ed’... Both girls laid on the rug in the front room, with paper towels under their buttocks...Then () [Sic] put the glove on and proceeded to crawl across the rug to the girl who she was about to examine, placing her clean plastic glove on the rug.¹³⁸

For both Dalton and Chouinard, illicit activities were entangled with illicit environments—spaces that transgressed categorical boundaries established by the law. But it was this very hybridity, this blurring of distinctions, that fueled the development of the Feminist Women’s Health Centers both as political projects and spatial experiments. In the years that followed, Downer and her colleagues would continue to design spaces that operated somewhere between clinics, education centers, living rooms, and campaign headquarters.

Originally called Self-help Clinic One, a reference to its status as the first explicitly feminist health clinic in the country, the LA FWHC was strategically sited at the nexus of radical feminist and lesbian feminist activism in Los Angeles’ midtown neighborhood. Downer worked in midtown at the Crenshaw Women’s Center (CWC), an informal gathering space founded in January 1970 that hosted a collection of feminist events and happenings—theater performances, film screenings, abortion and contraceptive counseling, and vocational instruction were all commonplace. Located at 1027 South Crenshaw Boulevard, the CWC occupied one half of a twelve-hundred

¹³⁷ Caruana, 7.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

square foot duplex, the other half belonging to a woman who recommended the space to the group. A short eight months after its opening, fifteen hundred women were affiliated with the CWC, coming to the space independently or as members of groups like the Women's Liberation School or the Anti-Rape Squad.¹³⁹ In March of the following year, Downer participated in the center's newly formed steering committee and began running clinical services out of its back room with the help of Lorraine Rothman.¹⁴⁰ The two women also ran the Women's Abortion Referral Service (WARS) on Tuesdays in the CWC's front room, during which time they would counsel and prepare women to receive therapeutic abortions¹⁴¹ at the nearby San Vicente Hospital.¹⁴²

The Crenshaw Women's Center was particularly important to lesbian feminists living in midtown Los Angeles, who ran a suicide prevention hotline for lesbians from the center and hosted a weekly dance on Saturday nights called "Sisters Coffeehouse."¹⁴³ It also served as a rare space where queer and straight women could engage in open conversation, the sort of exchange that had become increasingly difficult as homophobia took root in liberal feminist organizations like the National Organization for Women

¹³⁹ Daphne Spain, *Constructive Feminism: Women's Spaces and Women's Rights in the American City* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2016), 61.

¹⁴⁰ In addition to demonstrating pelvic self-examinations and teaching women how to assess the health of their vagina and cervix, Rothman, Downer, and feminists at the CWC made two minute pregnancy tests available to women. At home pregnancy tests did not become widely available in pharmacies across the U.S. until the late 1970s, so the ability to test for pregnancy outside of a hospital or medical clinic was very novel during the early days of the CWC.

¹⁴¹ Therapeutic abortions are categorized as abortions completed because the pregnant individual has a dangerous or potentially dangerous health condition, whereas elective abortions are completed at a pregnant individual's request, regardless of preexisting health conditions. Therapeutic abortions were legalized in California in 1967, six years prior to *Roe v. Wade* protected women's liberty to choose to have an abortion without excessive government restriction.

¹⁴² Spain, 123.

¹⁴³ Jeanne Cordova, Lynne Harper, Barbara McLean, Bee Ottinger, Caren Pressley, Lee Hansen Sission, Kay Stevens, Tyler and Sharon Zecha, "Calendar," *The Lesbian Tide*, April 1972, 30.

(NOW) during the late 1960s.¹⁴⁴ This ongoing dialogue was epitomized by a conference co-hosted by the CWC and Gay Women's Liberation on February 20, 1972. Titled "Sexual Politics: A Workshop Between Gay and Straight Women," the event brought together around 100 gay, bi-sexual, and straight women to discuss their sexual experiences, preconceptions of one another, and to develop sisterly bonds.¹⁴⁵

Yet the Crenshaw Women's Center represented just one site in an emerging geography of lesbian spaces in Los Angeles, including the Daughters of Bilitis center at 852 Cherokee Avenue, the Gay Community Services Center's Liberation House at 1168 N. Edgemont Street, and the Gay Women's Services Center at 1168 Glendale Boulevard. In February of 1971, Peace Corps and Civil Rights movement veteran Del Whan split off from the CWC to found the Gay Women's Services Centers (GWSC), the first incorporated social agency for exclusively lesbians in the United States.¹⁴⁶ Whan belonged to a cohort of lesbians who believed that queer activism should exist separately from feminist activism, yet they were often placed in a double bind as they faced misogyny in predominantly male-led and male-dominated LGBTQ+ organizations. As a result, many of the members of the GWSC came directly from the Los Angeles chapter of Gay Liberation Front, where many felt their activist agendas as lesbian women were treated as subservient to those of gay men.

¹⁴⁴ Famously, National Organization of Women (NOW) leader Betty Friedan spoke out against lesbian activism within the feminist movement, claiming that lesbian women's political agendas distracted from NOW's mission to achieve social and economic equality for women. In a NOW meeting, Friedan called lesbian feminist activists a "lavender menace," a phrase which lesbian feminist agitators appropriated and used to refer to themselves in the 1970s.

¹⁴⁵ "Sexual Politics: A Workshop Between Gay and Straight Women," *Everywoman* 1, no. 4 (March 5, 1971), 13.

¹⁴⁶ Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 170.

Even still, a strong community of lesbian feminists remained at the Crenshaw Women's Center until its closing in 1972. In the wake of the CWC's demise, the Los Angeles FWHC moved two blocks south on S. Crenshaw Boulevard. Eventually Rothman and Downer were able to secure the former CWC building at 1027 S. Crenshaw Blvd for their feminist clinic, moving back into the space and occupying both sides of the duplex building.¹⁴⁷ Many constituents of the CWC remained interlocutors in the LA FWHC, yet the change in mission at 1027 S. Crenshaw Blvd meant less time for lesbian-focused social events and more attention to self-help health practices, driving lesbian feminists to seek out social space at other lesbian community centers. Yet staff members at the LA FWHC continued to work in collaboration with lesbian feminist organizations, even training individuals involved in the founding of the first lesbian health clinic in the world at the Gay Community Services Center.¹⁴⁸

In addition to sharing constituents with the former CWC, the LA FWHC adopted the CWC organizers' dynamic approach to interior design—furnishing the space at little expense and encouraging a communal spirit of working, living, and making clinical space together. Bean bags, couches, and chairs crowded most rooms to facilitate meetings and events. In the former bedroom was a library filled with feminist newsletters, pamphlets, and books from around the country—a mimeograph machine was used often to reproduce and circulate those documents. Activists embraced the ambiguity of the CWC, what

¹⁴⁷ Spain, 111-113.

¹⁴⁸ Mina Meyer, board member of the Gay Community Services Center (GCSC) founded the first lesbian clinic in the world in 1972. The clinic was the second at the GCSC, the first serving primarily gay men with Venereal disease. In addition to serving lesbian women's gynecological needs, the clinic was also a resource for gay women struggling with alcoholism. In fact, the clinic was awarded a \$1 million grant from the National Institute for Alcohol and Alcohol Abuse to create a recovery program for lesbian women. See Faderman and Timmons, pages 201-202.

Downer called its “flowing quality,” often simultaneously holding more serious discussions about women’s health in one room and a celebration in another.¹⁴⁹ The Crenshaw Women’s Center, as historian Daphne Spain puts it, “was a structure transformed into a symbol of women’s liberation through the action of its founders, the materials they assembled, and the women who visited.”¹⁵⁰

As the women of the Los Angeles FWHC settled into their new location at 1112 S. Crenshaw Blvd in 1974, and early clinics in the FFWHC formed around the country, the first few including the Orange County FWHC, Oakland FWHC, and Chico FWHC, self-help became both a philosophical ideal and a design principle for activist-clinicians. Self-help as theory and praxis, historian Michelle Murphy describes, placed a unique “emphasis on the epistemic authority of experience,” attempting to disrupt the circulation of ignorance regarding women’s bodies through physical encounter.¹⁵¹ This pursuit of self-knowledge was symbolized by the speculum, which feminists had redesigned to better facilitate self-examination, placing the handle upright for an ergonomic grip and attaching a mirror to render a woman’s cervix observable to her. Though individual, situated knowledge was central to the feminist health movement, self-help clinics were fundamentally collective projects. Women practicing cervical self-examination, menstrual extraction—the process of passing a menstrual period through vacuum aspiration—or other self-help practices, did so in what were called “friendship groups”

¹⁴⁹ Carol Downer, interviewed by Michelle Moravec, *The Sixties: Los Angeles Area Social Movements/Activists*, Virtual Oral/Aural History Archive, California State University Long Beach, 1988.

¹⁵⁰ Spain, 57-59.

¹⁵¹ Michelle Murphy, “Immodest Witnessing: The Epistemology of Vaginal Self-Examination in the U.S. Feminist Self-Help Movement,” *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 1 (2004), 118.

either at home or in a FWHC, alternatively referred to as the “participatory clinic.”¹⁵²

Breaking the cycle of ignorance was an iterative social and material practice; much in the way that feminists used the commonplace mimeograph machine to produce copies of feminist literature and extend their print run, they also used the self-help small group as an engine for expanding the reach of feminist health practices.

While regaining collective knowledge of women’s anatomy was central to the project of feminist health, so too was the physical, tactile experience of making alternative technologies and spaces. In 1971, the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective published their groundbreaking book *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, selling 225,000 copies in the first two years of its publishing with the New England Free Press, and many more after its republication by Simon and Schuster in 1973.¹⁵³ The book, which was a fixture in FWHCs across the country, emphasized the importance of the physical processes of self-help in its opening statement, invoking the possibility of “reclaiming activity through the production of tangible objects.” One of the members of the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective reflected on this claim in *Our Bodies, Ourselves*:

I thought that girls did not have to be physically strong. They could do everything they needed with their heads. The fact is that some mental work involves a back-up of physical strength. For example, engineers and architects can become more experienced in their trades if they are physically able and have the strength and stamina to build machines and structures. I now feel that all desirable qualities and abilities are neither male nor female, but rather human, and I am trying to get the most out of my body, mind, and feelings.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Jennifer Nelson, *More Than Medicine: A History of the Feminist Women’s Health Movement* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2015), 108.

¹⁵³ Wendy Kline, *Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women’s Health in the Second Wave* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 17.

¹⁵⁴ The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, *Our Body, Ourselves: A Book By and For Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 9.

Though the writers and readers of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* interpreted this suggestion of reclaiming physical strength in many ways, FWHCs became one testing ground for the practice of building “machines and structures.”¹⁵⁵

The Del-Em: Designing Technologies

Beginning in the mid-20th century, the American medical field saw a dramatic proliferation of contraceptive technologies. Though the birth control pill had previously been the American contraceptive of choice, the landscape of medical device production had shifted towards intrauterine devices (IUDs) in the late 1960s. By the end of 1970, over three million American women had been fitted with an IUD.¹⁵⁶ Though for some women the IUD presented an opportunity to forgo the daily chore of taking the Pill, and curtail its often unwelcome side effects, the story of the IUD is fundamentally wrapped up in the history of state-sponsored eugenics, beginning in the 1930s and reaching new heights in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1969, U.S. President Richard Nixon released a plan to make more contraceptives and solicit their use amongst low-income, primarily African American, women in the U.S. as well as women in the so-called ‘third-world.’ Under the governance of the Agency for International Development (AID) some 7.5 million international women were provided free contraception as part of the government’s efforts to reduce the population of, and thereby the cost of caring for, particular socio-economic, racial, and ethnic groups—namely immigrant women, indigenous women, and Black women.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 268.

¹⁵⁷ Tone, 266.

Public funding for contraception was bolstered by a sprint to produce new contraceptive technologies in the private sector. Invented by Hugh Davis, the Dalkon Shield represented one such technological advancement—ending, though, in spectacular failure. The device, which was brought to market in 1971, promised better protection against pregnancy and greater comfort for the user. But by 1974, A.H. Robins, the company manufacturing the Dalkon Shield, had received at least four hundred thousand complaints about the product. In addition to the immense pain of the placement and removal procedures, causing many women to pass out, the Dalkon Shield significantly increased the risk of uterine infection as well as perforation of the uterine wall.¹⁵⁸ Though lawsuits quickly ensued, and word spread of the Dalkon Shield’s ominous side-effects, the device was not recalled from the market until 1984.

Amidst this climate of eugenicist and profit-driven advancement of contraceptive technologies, radical feminists like Shulamith Firestone, author of *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), called for the cooptation of scientific advancement into feminist circles. Firestone and her colleagues asserted that the feminist project necessitated the development of effective reproductive technologies, “in order to free women from the ‘tyranny of reproduction’ which dictated the nature of women’s oppression.”¹⁵⁹ But while the medical sector focused on the advancement of contraceptive technologies, Lorraine Rothman turned instead to improving abortion technologies, inventing the Del-Em apparatus in 1971. A technological device created for the purposes of menstrual extraction, the Del-Em served the double function of menses control, the passing of a

¹⁵⁸ Tone, 279-280.

¹⁵⁹ Wajcman, 56.

menstrual period in a single sitting, and early stage abortion.¹⁶⁰ Menstrual extraction was designed as a modification of the more common abortion method dilation and curettage (D&C), in which the cervix is dilated and a curette is used to remove uterine tissue. The latter procedure was used by physicians in the states where early stage abortion had been legalized prior to the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, which federally protected abortion rights.¹⁶¹ One such physician, Dr. Franz Koomey, hosted Rothman and Downer in his Washington clinic to observe and practice the procedure, which the two women ultimately deemed to be too intrusive and too painful to adopt in full.¹⁶² Unlike D&C, menstrual extraction would use suction rather than scraping, a gentle approach that could be more safely completed both by paramedics and lay people.

Abortion via suction was not Lorraine Rothman's medical invention, though Rothman and other feminist paramedics were the first to popularize its use in the United States. The first clinical study was completed in China and published in the *Chinese Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* in 1958, recording around 200 cases of abortion via vacuum aspiration at the Ti Lan Qian district hospital and another one-hundred at a handful of other public hospitals. In their findings, Dr. Yuantai Wu and Dr. Xianzhen Wu concluded that the procedure, as compared to more common abortion procedures like D&C, incurred less risk of perforating the uterus and caused the patient pain and

¹⁶⁰ In her article "Menstrual Extraction, Abortion, and the Political Context of Feminist Self-Help," historian Denise Copelton notes that eight weeks of pregnancy was considered the threshold for the safe use of menstrual extraction as an abortive procedure. This said, some groups operated on different timelines.

¹⁶¹ Prior to *Roe v. Wade*, therapeutic abortion was conditionally legal in 20 states. Therapeutic abortion, though conditionally defined differently across states, was defined in California as abortions completed under circumstances "in which the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest or endangered the physical or mental health of the mother."

¹⁶² Rebecca Chalker and Carol Downer, *A Woman's Book of Choices: Abortion, Menstrual Extraction, RU-486* (New York and London: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1992), 117.

discomfort.¹⁶³ Almost a decade later, British obstetrician Dorothea Kerslake introduced the Chinese doctors' abortion procedure to her community in Newcastle and published an article in the U.S. journal *Obstetrics and Gynecology NY*, marking vacuum aspiration's entry into the U.S. clinical imaginary.

Though the many medical benefits of abortion via vacuum aspiration were central to feminist clinicians' choice to adopt and modify the practice, they were even more inspired by the procedure's relative simplicity, speed, and disposal with anesthetics. The vacuum aspirator, which created necessary pressure to complete the procedure was, however, too expensive a machine for American feminist clinicians to purchase or popularize. Lorraine Rothman's Del-Em was a simplified, cheaper, reproducible cousin of the vacuum aspirator, and menstrual extraction a more accessible procedure than vacuum aspiration. Rothman was committed to the notion that menstrual extraction was "not a medical treatment—but a home health-care technique," insisting that unlicensed women should be able to practice it outside of a hospital setting.¹⁶⁴ In a 1990 interview, she reflected on the process of ME, likening it to cleaning a kitchen:

If you've ever lived in a kitchen that has covings, the linoleum (that) goes up the side of the wall, underneath the cabinets... You can't see what's in the coving, but you know you've got to get in their and scrub it out. And after a while you know the shape of it. That's exactly what it seemed like to me. After a while you just know the configurations of uteruses.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Yuantai Wu and Xianzhen Wu, "A report of 300 cases using vacuum aspiration for the termination of pregnancy," trans. Dr Joyce W Leong and Roger V Short, *BMJ* 336,7657 (2008): 1332-3.

¹⁶⁴ Chalker and Downer, 113.

¹⁶⁵ Lorraine Rothman, interviewed by Carol Dyer, *The Sixties: Los Angeles Area Social Movements/Activists*, Virtual Oral/Aural History Archive, California State University Long Beach, March 31, 1990.

As easy to learn as housekeeping, menstrual extraction was designed to be accessible, first and foremost, to housewives, working women, and young feminists.

On December 6, 1971, Rothman filed a patent application with the US Patent and Trademark Office for a “Method for Withdrawing Menstrual Fluid,” or menstrual extraction. In the document, she claimed the Del-Em as a device “whereby substantially all of the menstrual fluid incident to a normal monthly ‘period’ may be removed in a small fraction of an hour.”¹⁶⁶ Abortion, however, was not mentioned. The patent’s carefully selected wording and imagery signified the dual, inner and outer, ambitions that feminist clinicians espoused regarding ME. Externally, the Del-Em was portrayed as an innocuous device used to manage menstrual cramps and bleeding. In its carefully constructed narrative, Rothman’s patent depicted the Del-Em as a categorizable, knowable apparatus, able to be approved and filed away by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office without raising suspicion. Whereas within feminist circles, the Del-Em symbolized a sweeping reclamation of control over women’s reproductive capacities, as well as the expansion of self-help praxis. “We are totally unconcerned with the question of whether or not a certain menstrual extraction would be classified as an abortion,” Downer clarified in a 1972 speech,

We simply want to control our bodies, to regulate our reproduction at whatever point we are in our reproductive cycle, or to relieve menstrual cramps, or to insure (Sic.) that a menstrual period will not spoil a vacation or venture. It is the male mind that is fascinated with the question of whether or not a given menstrual extraction is an abortion and whether or not his precious sperm will be interrupted in its journey to manhood.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Lorraine Rothman, Method for Withdrawing Menstrual Fluid. U.S. Patent 3,828,781 filed December 6, 1971, and issued August 13, 1974.

¹⁶⁷ Carol Downer (1972), 4.

As a technological device, the Del-Em was not designed to classify, nor render perceivable and regulatable, stages of women's reproductive cycle, but rather to return to women unconditional control over their bodies and their reproductive labor.

The illustrations included in the patent also obscured the political intentions behind the device, calling attention instead to its material thicknesses, points of connection, and functional performance. Save for one enlarged isometric view of the tail of the cannula, the patent rendered the device in section—showing the inner workings of the suction-producing device and receptacle. In one patent figure, the uterus was rendered in section as well, bringing it into the same plane of graphic expression as the rest of the device—an amalgam of lines and poché. What was, in popular culture, discursively imagined as the site of life and death was recast as a material extension of a biotechnical apparatus—a system component rather than a site of political confrontation.

Within literature circulated by the FFWHC and its allies, the Del-Em was visualized with a different graphic approach that suggested it was not a discrete apparatus, but rather a system of parts, capable of materializing in many permutations. In 1979, the Speculum Press/Self help Care Circle published feminist medical illustrator Suzann Gage's book *When Birth Control Fails: How to Abort Ourselves Safely*, which included to-scale drawings of the Del-Em as well as a brief set of instructions explaining the components of the device.¹⁶⁸ Two years later, the FFWHC republished Gage's

¹⁶⁸ Gage's book *When Birth Control Fails* was made at the request of feminist sociologist Barbara Ehrenreich, who requested that the manual be made for imprisoned women in Chile to use. Under the Pinochet military dictatorship, many women of the women who had "disappeared" were sent to prison, where they faced sexual assault and rape. Though *When Birth Control Fails* was made to aid Chilean women, it was never translated into Spanish, and thus never reached its intended audience. Gage's book reflects the broader feminist ambitions of disseminating self-help theory and praxis around the world. In fact, by 1981, *When Birth Control Fails* had been

illustrations in their book *A New View of A Woman's Body: A Fully Illustrated Guide*, omitting some of the supplementary commentary on its composition.¹⁶⁹ Unlike the patent figures, the illustrations in these books portrayed the Del-Em in its suggested configuration, as well as the complementary, everyday materials useful in completing ME: gloves, tissues, lubricating jelly, and a towel.

Though these illustrations certainly rendered the Del-Em more accessible to feminist self-help groups around the country, it was a subsequent publication, *A Woman's Book of Choices: Abortion, Menstrual Extraction, RU-486*, that made menstrual extraction truly accessible. With Rothman's permission, authors of the book Carol Downer and Rebecca Chalker re-published Gage's illustrations alongside all the supplies necessary to fashion a Del-Em: a canning jar, rubber stopper, tubing, cannulas, syringe, two-way bypass valve, lubricating jelly, a stirring device, razor blade, and cutting board. The detail with which these parts were described exceeded that of *When Birth Control Fails*, as did the extensive, thirteen-step instructions on the Del-Em's procurement, assembly, and use. According to the authors of *A Woman's Book of Choices*, Del-Em components like the canning jar could be found at "most large supermarkets and grocery stores" that sell "jelly-making equipment," the tubing could be purchased from "local science stores... and tropical fish stores," the stirring devices could be simple "toothpicks or coffee stirring sticks," and the cannulas, in a pinch, could be fashioned from more readily accessible 4mm tubing by "using an Exacto knife or single-edged razor blade and

distributed in around 15 countries, according to an article written in *Mother Jones* in April of 1981.

¹⁶⁹ The first published illustration of the Del-Em, drawn by Suzann Gage, circulated in a feminist quarterly magazine called *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* in 1978 and featured the same components as the patent in hyper-simplified, elevational view.

sealing one end with a heat source, such as an iron or light bulb.”¹⁷⁰ In an alchemical move, everyday consumer items were melded together to radically increase women’s power over their own bodies.

The making of the Del-Em was critical to both the expansion of the FFWHC platform and to the development of a radical, feminist design pedagogy. It featured a commitment to intra-acting with the material world, where ‘making-do’ meant allowing the unexpected potentials embedded in everyday objects to come to the fore. It reconceptualized ‘make-shift’ spatial processes as practices of shifting existing surroundings to glean new outcomes. Further, the Del-Em drew from quotidian objects to enable exceptional acts. In doing so, it proved that women had both the resources and capacity to collectively manage their health outside of a hospital setting, and to ensure the wellbeing of women who may have otherwise sought dangerous, life-threatening abortions. As Downer claimed in her address to the American Psychological Association in Hawaii, “abortions are so simple, they are downright dull; vaginal infections are diagnosed with a microscope; pap smears are easier to do than setting our hair; fitting a diaphragm is less complicated than stuffing a turkey.”¹⁷¹

The Clinic: Self-Help as Space-Praxis

In addition to seeing the rise of the feminist self-help movement, the early 1970s gave way to a shifting discourse on the politics of architectural practice. From 1968 to 1971, *the Whole Earth Catalog* (WEC) circulated amongst New Left radicals, propagating DIY approaches to learning about, making, and inhabiting buildings. Its

¹⁷⁰ Chalker and Downer, 248-251.

¹⁷¹ Downer (1972), 4.

editors expressed interest in reinstating the agency of the public was similarly asserted by several well-known architects of the time—among them Alison Smithson who, between 1973 and 1975, wrote a collection of essays advocating for “collective design,” and Charles Jencks, whose 1972 book *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation* promoted an emergent form of “direct action” in service of “shaping the local environment towards desired ends.”¹⁷² These designers espoused postmodern rejections of the formality and perceived elitism of the preceding modernist architectural movement, embracing notions of complexity and contradiction explored by their contemporaries Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.¹⁷³

Concurrently, an international cohort of architects founded the self-help housing movement, putting DIY architectural theories into practice on a global scale. John F.C. Turner was one such architect, championing new approaches to housing both in his writing, most notably his essay titled “Housing as a Verb,” and in his early community-based design practice in Peru. For Turner and his interlocutors, self-help housing was as much about a value system as it was a construction process—it represented a method for gauging the “impact of housing activity on the lives of the housed,” and improving upon living conditions through grassroots construction processes.¹⁷⁴ In most cases, a handful of families cooperatively organized, delegated specialized skill acquisition and construction tasks, and completed projects over a six-month to one-year long period. Instead of acting

¹⁷² M. Christine Boyer, *Not Quite Architecture: Writing around Alison and Peter Smithson* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 272-290; Charles Jencks, *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013, 1972), 15.

¹⁷³ Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art in association with the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, Chicago; New York: Distributed by Harry N. Abrams, 2002).

¹⁷⁴ John F. C. Turner and R. Fichter, *Freedom to Build: Dweller Control of the Housing Process* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 153.

as a master-builder, the architect assumed the role of logistical coordinator; the design of the house was based on the value system established by the dwellers, rather than that of the architect. German architect Walter Segal was another prominent advocate of self-help housing, but promoted it primarily in middle-and-working class communities in the United Kingdom. For Segal, self-help housing manifested itself as a tabulated methodology for construction—a self-build sequence which he called “the Segal Method.” In following his simple, 19-phase construction handbook, residents could “participate in a significant way in the housing process and enjoy the sense of satisfaction and achievement that can follow.”¹⁷⁵

Much in the way of the self-help practices of feminist clinicians, architects like Turner, Segal, and their non-professionalized peers viewed self-help as an “attitude of mind rather than a system of construction.”¹⁷⁶ Though both practices developed amongst distinct cohorts, one a group of feminist activists in Los Angeles and another amongst a group of largely male, Western architects, they shared an interest in reclaiming autonomous, community-based control over daily life and the environments that nourished it. In the broadest sense, self-help signified a repudiation of gubernatorial and corporate control in favor of self-governance and collective socio-political organization; a process that required the crafting of “protocols” that could “change, move between sites, and be tailored to particular needs,” as historian Michelle Murphy has aptly described.¹⁷⁷

The self-help space-praxis present in Feminist Women’s Health Centers, however, was unique from that of the burgeoning self-help housing movement in several

¹⁷⁵ Jon Broome, “The Segal Method: Walter Segal’s approach,” *The Architects’ Journal* 184, no. 45 (1986), 33.

¹⁷⁶ Broome, 36.

¹⁷⁷ Murphy (2012), 30.

ways. First, while the global, self-help housing movement focused largely on the single-family home, FWHC clinicians were singularly interested in the participatory clinic as a site of architectural intervention. This, in turn, implied a vastly different constituency of lay-designers. Whereas Segal proposed that a home would be built by a nuclear family, and Turner a grouping of families, FWHCs were created by a collection of women held together in kinship by their political beliefs. Second, while self-help housing emphasized the process of constructing a building from start to finish, feminist-clinicians applied their tenets of self-help space-praxis primarily to existing buildings. Acts of interior reorganization and improvisation were central to the execution of FWHC space-praxis. Finally, it is critical to note that while self-help housing methodologies and feminist self-help space-praxes were developed in the same period of time, the latter was most directly correlated to the project of feminist self-help gynecology. As such, the relationship between women's bodies and architectural environments was uniquely central in the feminist self-help imaginary.

Echoing the principles of self-help housing, FWHC architecture privileged rapid construction, cost efficiency, and flexibility. But beyond the realm of the architectural, the space-praxis of these activist-clinicians broadly mirrored the design principles deployed in the making of popular self-help literature of the time—including the Montreal Health Press' *Birth Control Handbook* (1968), Barbara Ehrenreich's and Deirdre English's books *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness* (1973) and *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (1973), as well as *Our Bodies, Ourselves: A Book By and For Women* (1973) originally distributed under the title *Women and Their Bodies: A Course* (1970). Feminist health pamphlets were

most often printed on newsprint, staple bound, and included hand-written additions. *Women and Their Bodies: A Course*, for example, featured a combination of handwriting and typewriting, emphasizing the personal nature of the medical information within. Likewise, FWHCs operated resourcefully, occupying whatever space was available—whether residential, office space, or former clinical space—on extremely tight, inconsistent budgets, all while maintaining a material identity that aligned with their mission of empowerment and personal care. Part of this identity came from the continual practice of collecting furniture from local homes; instead of hospital beds, women read, ate, and performed gynecological examinations on couches. In a blurring of the domestic, the political, and the clinical, the formerly designated living rooms of the LA FWHC, in its multiple occupations of South Crenshaw Boulevard, were often used for pelvic self-examinations, public education sessions, and clinic staff meetings.

Feminist Women’s Health Center organizers were also preoccupied with circulation patterns in the clinic. In preparation for an early expansion of the LA FWHC on Crenshaw Blvd, Carol Downer and Lorraine Rothman traveled to New York City to tour abortion clinics. One of their observations about these facilities was the fact that they were organized linearly—visitors would arrive and sit in the waiting room, progress to the examination room for their procedures, and exit out the clinic’s back door. This layout, Downer and Rothman felt, added to the dangerous mystique of the procedure, as patients were unable to see or speak to women post-operation. In response, the LA FWHC established a cyclical pattern of movement throughout space; women entered and exited using the same door, sometimes lingering to discuss their experiences, enjoying cheese and crackers provided by clinicians. This new approach to interior circulation

“empowered women to ask questions, observe how other women were doing, and support each other,” and it was reproduced in several early California FWHCs.¹⁷⁸

While the implementation of novel circulation strategies was central to supporting the emotional and physical wellbeing of patients, it was also part of a broader interest in mediating the relationship between bodies and buildings. Tackable walls were common in early FWHC interiors, rendering the interior elevations of these spaces dynamic and reactive. The texture of these surfaces was formed by a document bricolage; community rules, shopping lists, key chains, and anatomical diagrams populated walls in non-hierarchical stratification. When combined with the thick curtains and closed blinds that were typical privacy measures in FWHCs, this dense, lateral piling-up of surface-hung documents formed a protective enclosure—a “container” designed to nurture the “dynamic co-evolution” of women and the spaces they occupied. This layer of protection allowed for what cultural theorist Zoë Sofoulis has called potential space, “an imaginative space between inner and outer worlds... work space(s) for discovery and invention.”¹⁷⁹ Walls were the first layer of this zone of possibility, serving as both barriers from the outside world and mediums for creative accumulation and co-education in the practice of self-help.

An attention to surface in feminist practice at large was further underscored in the installation and performance project *Womanhouse*, which took over an empty Los Angeles mansion in 1972 to explore the relationship between women and domestic space. The project was designed by twenty-one students associated with the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts, as well as the program’s directors Judy

¹⁷⁸ Spain, 123.

¹⁷⁹ Zoë Sofia, “Container Technologies,” *Hypatia* 15, no. 2 (2000), 182-185.

Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. For Schapiro, Womanhouse addressed the following pedagogical questions: “What would happen... if we created a home in which we pleased no one but ourselves?... what if each woman were to develop her own dreams and fantasies in one room of that home?” After the group of women mended the dilapidated building, rooms were divided up amongst the artists and used as platforms for individual and small group projects.

Among its most memorable spaces was the "Nurturant Kitchen" (see p. 91), designed by Susan Frazier, Vicky Hodgett, and Robin Weltsch, in which walls were laden with over-easy eggs and detached female breasts.¹⁸⁰ Here, the wall became a critique of the woman as nurturer as well as a site of appropriation, blending the intersection between architecture, body, and everyday life. Such an approach, used for artistic expression in the case of Womanhouse, was expanded into an operative mode of space-praxis at the FWHC. The clinic, and its many services and surfaces, acted as a site of creative, spatial appropriation—allowing its tenants to subvert material manifestations of medical power to seditious, political ends.

While the promising ‘potential space’ of the clinic interior facilitated the exploration of redesigned circulation patterns, hybridized spatial programming, and new relationships between bodily and architectural surfaces, the clinic’s thickening façade also corresponded with the rising necessity of self-defense against anti-abortion activists. As the Federation of Feminist Women’s Health Centers expanded across the country in the 1980s and 1990s, and unaffiliated women’s health centers found footing in countless

¹⁸⁰ Miriam Schapiro, “The Education of Women as Artists: Project Womanhouse,” *Art Journal* 31, No. 3 (1972), 268.

other cities, so too did assaults on these buildings and those who worked in them.¹⁸¹ These attacks were led by an array of anti-abortion activist groups, most often Christian extremists, including the infamous organization Operation Rescue. Led by Randall Terry, Operation Rescue was founded in 1986 with a slogan that matched its combative disposition: “If you believe abortion is murder, act like it’s murder.”¹⁸² Borrowing blockading tactics from various New Left movements of the 1970s, Operation Rescue members were among the many pro-life activists that undertook intimidating campaigns of direct action across the country.¹⁸³ Though at times these organizations intentionally appropriated the language of nonviolent protest employed in the Civil Rights movement—during the 1988 Democratic National Convention in Atlanta, for example, where over 134 Operation Rescue demonstrators were arrested without resistance—their protests not infrequently culminated more violently, in arson attacks, clinic bombings, and other scare tactics.¹⁸⁴

Though many anti-abortion, disruptive antics were focused directly at health center staff and visitors, the clinic building itself also became the target of violence. One of the first episodes of architectural violence in the FFWHCs was an arson attack at the Los Angeles FWHC in 1985, which reduced much of the building to ashes. In the same year, anti-abortion activists hung a dead, neighborhood cat from the L.A. clinic’s front

¹⁸¹ This violence continues to plague abortion clinics today—since 1977 there have been eleven murders, 42 bombings, and 188 instances of arson targeted at abortion clinics and their medical staff. See: “2018 Violence and Disruption Statistics,” National Abortion Federation, 2018.

¹⁸² Janet Hadley, *Abortion: Between Freedom and Necessity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 163.

¹⁸³ L.A. Kaufmann, *Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Radicalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2017), 89.

¹⁸⁴ “Abortion Foes Jailed in Atlanta,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 1988, p. 30.

door.¹⁸⁵ During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Redding FWHC was subjected to four arson attacks, the Santa Rosa FWHC was held hostage by anti-abortion protesters for eight hours, and the Chico FWHC fought a decade of legal battles to protect patients from picketer harassment. In 1992, two Molotov-cocktail firebombs were launched at the Sacramento FWHC, damaging the clinic and neighboring office units. These events were among a sum total of 585 incidents of vandalism, 29 bombings, 124 arson attacks, and 80 butyric acid attacks that plagued abortion clinics nationwide in the 17 years following 1977.¹⁸⁶

Feminist clinicians had little luck soliciting government protections for their health centers during Ronald Reagan's Presidency. In a 1984 interview with *The Washington Times*, Reagan's FBI Director William H. Webster refuted popular demands that anti-abortion violence should be categorized as an act of terrorism, which the FBI itself defined as "the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives."¹⁸⁷ Claiming that anti-abortion violence fell outside of this protocol because it was not caused by a "definable group or activity," nor directed specifically towards a government agency, Webster slighted his own department's definition of terrorism, justifying his decision to deny feminist health

¹⁸⁵ This event was noted in the Feminist Women's Health Center February 1985 Newsletter. In the same document, other anti-abortion violent incidents were mentioned, including one in which a group of men through a plastic bag at the clinic which held a plastic doll with a coat hanger around its neck. Protesters also frequently vandalized clinic exteriors with threatening messages.

¹⁸⁶ National Abortion Federation, "NAF Violence and Disruption Statistics: Incidents of Violence & Disruption Against Abortion Providers," 2014.

¹⁸⁷ S. Taylor, Jr., "When Is a Terrorist Not Necessarily a Terrorist," *The New York Times*, December 13, 1984, p. A28.

workers federal aid.¹⁸⁸ Left to fend for themselves, FWHC clinicians took on new design projects to protect their fellow health workers and patients—reinforcing the façade as a barrier from the outside world. In Redding, a fence was constructed inside the portico of the clinic, protecting the building frontage and forcing patients to park in the more secure backyard. In Chico, a free-standing façade stood proud of the Victorian, single-family home the clinic inhabited, giving it a more banal aesthetic all while concealing apertures into the patient consultation rooms.

While in the early 1970s feminist-clinicians focused on imagining feminist, technoscientific futures and new modes of co-working and living, in the 1980s and 1990s, their main task was to defend and salvage what little was left of the participatory clinic. Ironically, in the early days of the FFWHC, feminist self-helpers often remarked that the participatory clinic was “not a place,” but “any group of women getting together to share experiences and learn about their bodies through direct action.”¹⁸⁹ While in some ways this sentiment rings true, particularly as it relates to the mobility and reproducibility of the participatory clinic, this chapter has argued that such a statement falls short of capturing the very palpable material and spatial footprint of these feminist clinics. But even for FFWHC clinicians, the fact that the self-help health center was a situated, brick-and-mortar location became undeniable by the 1980s, as they were subjected to bombings, arson, and other architectural attacks.

Even though these more drastic facade reinforcement projects arose in the 1980s, notions of privacy and self-preservation influenced the design of the participatory clinic

¹⁸⁸ “Terrorist Bombings Decline; Abortion Attacks Excluded,” *The Washington Times*, December 12, 1984, p. 14.

¹⁸⁹ Quoted in Murphy, *Seizing the Means of Reproduction: Entanglements of Feminism, Health, and Technoscience*, 25.

since its conception. At the clinic, window shades were almost always drawn, doors often locked, and the entry points relocated to the back of the building. These tactics were not just practical but symbolic, emphasizing “the ‘revolutionary’ politics” of self-help practices “by foregrounding the need for secrecy.”¹⁹⁰ Indeed, the Feminist Women’s Health Centers borrowed their language of secrecy from feminist predecessors like Jane, an underground collective of women in Chicago that performed around 11,000 illegal abortions to women prior to the Roe v. Wade decision.¹⁹¹ Founded in 1969, Jane members started their work by referring women to underground abortionists, but quickly took matters into their own hands, hiring an abortionist who taught the collective members—mostly white, working class women from the affiliated Chicago Women’s Liberation Union—how to complete the Dilation & Curettage (D&C) abortions themselves. The group functioned under the façade of a coded naming system: ‘Jane’ was the pseudonym taken on by all women operating the phones, ‘the Front’ was a gathering place where women congregated before receiving an abortion, and ‘the Place’ was the space, typically an apartment, in which the procedure was carried out.¹⁹² Throughout Jane’s spatial network, privacy was necessary for the subversive reclamation of power, and subsequently became a hallmark value of radical feminism.

Though privacy was necessary in the case of Jane’s operations, and even to a significant extent unavoidable in the case of the FFWHC’s operations, the notion of privacy was, and continues to be, a double-edged sword for feminists. On the one hand,

¹⁹⁰ Murphy (2012), 48.

¹⁹¹ Firestarter Press, *Jane: Documents from Chicago’s Clandestine Abortion Service 1968-1973* (Baltimore, MD: Firestarter Press, 2004), 2.

¹⁹² Laura Kaplan, *The Story of Jane: The Legendary Underground Feminist Abortion Service* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 92.

the logic of privacy has been mobilized to protect women's reproductive rights, including the right to abortion—hence the common phrase 'my body my choice.'¹⁹³ On the other hand, when feminists tout privacy, they also, intentionally or not, endorse its henchmen, the 'private sphere' and 'privatization.' In the case of the former, the circumscription of the 'private sphere' in relation to the so-called 'public sphere,' has enabled the primitive accumulation of women and their labor power—an example of which includes the persistence of unwaged housework.¹⁹⁴ Meanwhile, privatization represents another, albeit related, mode of capitalist accumulation: the privatization of space, from the enclosure of nature to urban commons.¹⁹⁵ To paraphrase the feminist, pro-abortion sentiment 'my body, my choice,' the agents of privatization alluded to here employ a similar analytic to construct their own claims to privacy—'my property, my choice.' Though feminist self-help clinicians were certainly not asking private industry to take back the reigns of women's health, nor were they intentionally valorizing the separation of public and private spheres, their dangerous flirtation with values like privacy point to the many ways

¹⁹³ *Roe v. Wade* was upheld on the basis of women's right to privacy. Interestingly, the term "privacy," is not found anywhere in the constitution, but has often been inferred from the Fourteenth Amendment's protection of "personal liberty." For this reason, *Roe v. Wade* has often been regarded, by liberals and conservatives alike, as an unstable legal decision.

¹⁹⁴ The Wages for Housework campaign was founded in 1972 by Silvia Federici, Selma James, and Mariarosa Dalla Costa to demand payment for women's social reproductive labor in the home. In calling for wages, these socialist feminists' end goal was not just to "enter capitalist relations" but to "break capital's plan for women" as unpaid laborers, thereby accelerating the collapse of capital by making it economically impossible for it to reproduce itself. Wages for Housework was not only a contestation of capital at large, but also its division of public and private spheres to enforce the division of waged and unwaged labor. Though the FWHC was not a part of the larger socialist feminist movement, it is likely that many feminists involved in the project would've been aware of the Wages for Housework campaign, and its implicit critique of the private sphere/privacy. For more information on Wages for Housework, see Silvia Federici, "Wages Against Housework."

¹⁹⁵ See Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*.

in which 1970s feminisms were entangled with contradictory forces like capitalism and patriarchy.

On the ground, practices like drawing the shades and locking the doors of the participatory clinic also had real implications on who was included in the making of the participatory clinic and who was excluded. Though the self-proclaimed “six white housewives” who founded the FFWHC did not describe their movement as a specifically white feminist project, vis-à-vis contemporaneous, Black feminist and Chicana feminist health movements, the majority of its participants were in fact white, middle and working class women.¹⁹⁶ In their attempts to make a color-blind organization, gendered analyses of health superseded analyses of racial inequalities in the medical system.¹⁹⁷ While it is true that feminists who participated in the FFWHC often gave presentations on the issue of sterilization in their nation-wide education tours, an issue of critical importance to women of color health activists, their unwillingness to directly confront issues of race and racism led to their omission of care for many health issues facing Black, Chicana, and indigenous women, including uterine fibroids, lupus, sickle cell anemia, as well as certain legal and political issues, like women’s childbirth rights in prison.¹⁹⁸ As the horizons of

¹⁹⁶ Federation of Feminist Women’s Health Centers, *A New View of a Woman’s Body*, 17.

¹⁹⁷ For a more in depth analysis of the emergence of colorblindness discourse in the U.S. and its implication for the maintenance of white supremacy, see George Lipsitz, “The Sounds of Silence: How Race Neutrality Preserve White Supremacy,” in *Seeing Race Again: Counteracting Colorblindness across the Disciplines*.

¹⁹⁸ For more information on sterilization of U.S. minority women, see Brianna Theobald, *Reproduction on the Reservation: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Colonialism in the Long Twentieth Century*; Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Representation, and the Meaning of Liberty*; Joanna Schoen, “Between Choice and Coercion: Women and the Politics of Sterilization in North Carolina, 1929-1975;” and “Policing Pregnant Pilgrims: Situating the Sterilization Abuse of Mexican-Origin Women in Los Angeles County.” For more on imprisoned mothers’ reproductive rights see Robin Levi and Ayelet Waldman, *Inside This Place, Not of It: Narratives from Women’s Prison*. For more information on Black feminist imperatives for women’s health, see Beverly Smith, “Black Women’s Health: Notes for a Course.”

the FFWHC waned in the late 1980s and 1990s, organizations including, but not limited to, the Black Women's National Health Project, Sistersong, and the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center coalesced to take on these health concerns.

In describing a historical moment in the 1990s where many American, queer radicals abandoned the streets for the safety of the university, philosopher Holly Lewis points out that the “paradox of this militant retreat into self-care and safe spaces at once individualized struggle and created a clear inner-outer protective barrier between the oppressed and their oppressors.”¹⁹⁹ Though Lewis describes a different political occasion than is covered in this chapter, her point is translatable here: in protecting themselves against anti-abortion and anti-feminist activists, FWHC clinicians isolated themselves from their adversaries, but also from potential co-conspirators, namely women of color feminists. In turn, they also stymied the potential for some of the most useful, subversive space-praxes established in the participatory clinic to gain traction more broadly. These practices advocated for, and continue to suggest, the radical potential of disordering existing space and adopting a form of feminist adhocism centered on meeting women's material and spatial needs. At its best, self-help space-praxis at the FWHCs allowed for a generative blurring of distinctions: between menstrual regulation and abortion, clinical space and residential space; architects and feminists; activism and architectural practice.

No Blueprints: Imagining New (Feminist) Worlds

As it existed at the Feminist Women's Health Centers, self-help was a social, material, and space-praxis that implicated itself in many spheres of action. Politically,

¹⁹⁹ Holly Lewis, *The Politics of Everybody: Feminism, Queer Theory, and Marxism* (London: Zed Books, 2016), 211.

stakeholders in the participatory clinic sought to contest the malfeasance of the U.S. healthcare system by reconfiguring both intimate and institutional relationships: from women's understandings of their own bodies, to their connections with one another, to their (dis)connection with the broader medical system. In order to counteract the prevailing system of medical care, feminist health workers developed new social and spatial protocols for reproductive care, highlighting the importance of practicing procedures like pelvic self-examinations and menstrual extraction in small group settings. Stakeholders in the participatory clinic were interested in intra-acting with the material world—from the scale of vaginal microbiota, to the speculum, to the clinic building itself. Guided by self-help's pedagogical stake in learning-while-doing, feminist-clinicians transformed quotidian objects and buildings into explicitly feminist technologies and spaces. It was the nourishing of “potential space” at the participatory clinic—the space “where inner and outer worlds” were “negotiated in the course of discovery/invention”—that inspired the design of the Del-Em and the development of the participatory clinic.²⁰⁰ In turn, feminist clinicians succeeded in making abortions safer and more accessible, even in the face of growing anti-abortion activism in the 1980s and 1990s.

FWHC spatial practitioners were not interested in the extravagance, nor the violence, of demolishing the material world and building anew, but rather in more modest tactics like shifting, reorganizing, and reconceptualizing existing environments. Seemingly small alterations like the reorientation of circulation throughout a building, the repurposing of existing space into clinical space, and appropriation of wall space for feminist literature and imagery, were leveraged towards the development of a

²⁰⁰ Sofia, 189.

counterhegemonic, feminist politics. Understood from this perspective, feminist self-help space-praxes at the FWHCs operated not only as critiques of state-controlled & privatized medicine, but can be read as appraisals of architectural hubris. Even the self-help architect Walter Segal, who professed a commitment to de-professionalized, communal construction processes, was guilty of attempting to reinstate a didactic, singular approach to architectural design—the Segal Method—a new universal. It would be a mistake to go looking for such a design mandate in this brief history of the Feminist Women’s Health Centers. This chapter proposes no blueprint for a feminist approach to architectural practice, nor a “do-it-yourself feminist architecture kit,” to quote members of the UK-based feminist design co-operative Matrix.²⁰¹ Rather, what feminist, self-help space-praxis offers us is a different political imperative for space-making, one that emphasizes the importance of nourishing spaces of feminist resistance, sites that allow us to imagine alternative modes of inhabiting the material world.

²⁰¹ Matrix, *Making Space: Women and the Man Made Environment*. (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1984), 8.

Chapter 3.

Black Feminist Repair: Moms for Housing, Mothers/Men Against Senseless Killings, and Abolitionist Space-Praxis

In the turbulent years of the mid-1960s—which saw the rise of radical Black political figures like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., and organizations like the Black Panther Party—New York Senator Patrick Moynihan and the US Department of Labor published the now infamous 1965 report, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” In contrast to other Black Power and Civil Rights activists of the time, who were making analyses connecting wealth disparities in the U.S. to structural racism, Moynihan and the co-authors of his report pinned the economic struggles of African Americans on “the deterioration of the Negro family.”²⁰² The alleged “broken homes” of the urban Black community, as Moynihan called them, were defined in the report by the dissolution of marriages, the presence of ‘illegitimate’ children, and dependence on welfare, but above all, they were united in the common status of Black women as heads of household. The re-port offers a glimpse into popular, white discourses about race, gender, family, and economic disparity in the 1960s, but it also highlights how central the figure of the Black mother—in her fabricated, fictionalized form—was to the racist, white imagination of African American struggle. The Black mother was cast as responsible for the downfall of her community, incapable of assimilating the Black

²⁰² Patrick Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, Washington D.C., 1965), 5.

family into the archetypical form of the white American family, and thus an unqualified keeper of the Black home.

A product of pervasive racism in American culture, the Moynihan report has, for several decades, been an object of Black feminist critique. Through their careful analyses of Moynihan's writing, authors including Roderick Ferguson, June Jordan, and Patricia Hill Collins have worked to expose the racial and gendered logics that underpin mid-to-late 20th century definitions of the family, as well as to reclaim the status of Black women and mothers as caretakers, leaders, and community activists in urban neighborhoods. In her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins argues that the institution of Black motherhood is "both dynamic and dialectical," comprised of a "series of constantly renegotiated relationships that African-American women experience with one another, with Black children, with the larger African-American community and with self."²⁰³ While within predominantly white, radical feminist traditions, motherhood is often portrayed as a thoroughly oppressive social institution, one that binds women to the unpaid, affective labor of childcare, Black feminist conceptions of motherhood are historically far more diverse and complex. Some Black women, Collins notes, agree with radical feminist positions on motherhood, viewing it as a "burdensome condition that stifles their creativity, exploits their labor, and makes them partners in their own oppression." Other Black women, however, "see motherhood as providing the basis for self-actualization, status in the Black community, and a catalyst for social activism."²⁰⁴

²⁰³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, Second Edition* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 176.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

This chapter explores the possibilities embedded in the latter position, learning from contemporary articulations of Black motherhood that serve as a foundation for both socio-political activism and space-praxis. Orienting itself toward the work of two contemporary activist collectives—Mothers/Men Against Senseless Killings (MASK) and Moms for Housing—the chapter explores how Black mothers negotiate complex and unfolding series of spatial relationships, in addition to the social relationships Collins alludes to above. As will soon be elucidated, Black feminist claims to space, conceptions of space, and refusals of existing, racist and sexist spatial scripts are inextricably intertwined with the institution of Black motherhood. They are also connected in their overarching reparative ethos. For MASK and Moms for Housing, space-praxis is not only a feminist project, but an abolitionist project—it simultaneously involves mending broken structures in our existing material world, while envisioning new systems of mutuality and accountability for a post-policing, post-property, post-capitalist future.

Because both activist collectives explored herein are contemporary, the archive of evidence referenced in this chapter will differ from that of the previous three chapters. Instead of relying on zines, home videos and photographs housed in library-based special collections, this chapter will draw from more ephemeral, digital sources—from social media forums like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, to news outposts like The New York Times and Democracy Now, to digital activism platforms like The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project. Placing Moms for Housing and MASK in a broader matrix of anti-racist, feminist activism, the following pages will also invoke the work of abolitionist groups, transformative justice collectives, and women-led land trusts. Finally, the chapter will also draw on an archive of Black Panther Party spaces and social services, focusing

on the work of women in the party. By the end of the 1960s, women constituted sixty percent of the Party's rank-and-file membership, and were represented in even higher proportion in the Party's free clinics, breakfast programs, and schools.²⁰⁵ Their work as activists and spatial practitioners in and through the Black Panther Party's free social service programs provides a meaningful, historical precedent for the kind of projects that Moms for Housing and Mothers/Men Against Senseless Killings have undertaken.

Toolkits for Repair: Mothers/Men Against Senseless Killings

Anti-racist, feminist, and queer abolitionist organizers often talk about their work in spatial terms. The unbuilding of oppressive social, economic, and spatial systems—the dismantling of the master's house, to borrow poet Audre Lorde's phrasing—also triggers the necessity for building new infrastructures of support.²⁰⁶ Abolitionists, feminist author Aurora Levins Morales has claimed, must keep one foot in the existing world they seek to change, and the other foot “in the world” that is “not yet created.”²⁰⁷ In other words, they must inhabit a space in which one world is crumbling and another is growing in its place.

One example of the spatial dimensions of abolitionist ideas is found in the widely circulated “Portrait of Praxis,” authored by the Pennsylvania-based, anti-sexual violence collective Philly Stands Up! The eleven-page document outlines the group's approach to confronting sexual assault and facilitating survivor healing without involving law

²⁰⁵ Bobby Seale, *A Lonely Rage: The Autobiography of Bobby Seale* (New York: The New York Times Book Co., Inc, 1978), 177

²⁰⁶ Audre Lorde, “The Master's Tools will Never Dismantle the Master's House,” in *Gender, Space, Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 54.

²⁰⁷ Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan, *Fumbling Toward Repair: A Workbook for Community Accountability Facilitators* (Chicago: Project NIA and Just Practice, 2019), 6.

enforcement. In conflict resolution meetings, survivors of sexual assault and their perpetrators are asked to imagine themselves occupying a building, with each individual inhabiting their own floor. Each room represents the individual's psychological state, holding emotions like “‘anger’, ‘feeling, misunderstood’, ‘embarrassed’, ‘joyful’, ‘irritated’,” or “rational.”²⁰⁸ Survivors and perpetrators might be asked to consider what it means to take the hallway to another room, to express what they need (emotionally, materially) to move from grief to safety, for instance. They might also be asked to take the stairs to their partner's floor, spatially relocating themselves in order to better understand another perspective on their situation. For mediators in Philly Stands Up, transformative justice—the process of enabling survivor safety, healing, and agency through community-based systems of accountability and care—requires a spatial imagination, a reordering of the world and an individual's position within it to heal incidents of sexual violence.

Both Moms for Housing and Mothers/Men Against Senseless Killings exist in a milieu of anti-racist resource lists, workbooks, broadsheets, and toolkits that have been circulated widely on the internet in the past decade—and even more so during COVID-19—each suggesting space-praxes and organizing techniques necessary for building a world without police, prisons, sexual violence, and rent burden. From Black Lives Matter's “Healing in Action,” toolkit for healing justice and direct action, to Critical Resistance's “Abolition Organizing Toolkit,” to generationFIVE's “Transformative Justice Handbook,” to The Safe OUTside the System (S.O.S.) safe party planning toolkit, to Mariame Kaba and Hira Hassan's *Fumbling Towards Repair*, an abundance of how-

²⁰⁸ Esteban Lance Kelly and Jenna Peters-Golden, “Philly Stands Up Portrait of Praxis: An Anatomy of Accountability,” (2010).

to/DIY documents have brought the practical knowledge of community organizers to the fore, sharing their tactical tools for the daily work of abolitionist praxis.²⁰⁹ These documents are almost never didactic blueprints for movement building, but how-to manuals suggesting organizing methods that can be adopted, appropriated, and molded to fit specific contexts. While circulated in print and PDF, they rely on tangible examples of political organization and space-praxis that happen ‘in the field,’ and hope to inspire this kind of boots-on-the-ground work.

One such movement that exemplifies and expresses the situated insights of community organizing is Mothers/Men Against Senseless Killings (MASK), formerly called Mothers Against Senseless Killings. Organized in response to the 2015 homicide of 34-year-old mother Lucille Barnes and the police siege of a 94-year-old woman’s home on a single block just southeast of Hamilton Park in Chicago’s Englewood neighborhood, MASK began with one mother, Tamar Manasseh, sitting down in a lawn chair on that very block and inviting the mothers of the neighborhood to join her.²¹⁰ Through the simple acts of sitting on the street corner, grilling and serving food for community members, and having conversations, MASK has decreased the rate of violent crimes and gun-related incidents in their census district. In describing MASK’s work, Manasseh has insisted on its straightforwardness:

²⁰⁹ Black Lives Matter, “Healing in Action Toolkit,” accessed online on February 24, 2021. https://blacklivesmatter.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/BLM_HealingAction_r1.pdf; Critical Resistance, “The Abolitionist Toolkit,” accessed online on February 24, 2021. <http://criticalresistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/CR-Abolitionist-Toolkit-online.pdf>; Safe Outside the System and the Audre Lorde Project, “Safer Party Toolkit,” accessed online on February 24, 2021. <https://drive.google.com/file/>

²¹⁰ Tamar Manasseh, “We are Reclaiming Chicago one Corner at a Time,” *The New York Times*, October 22, 2017. Accessed online. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/22/opinion/chicago-gangs-crime-mothers.html>.

“It’s simple. We cared. We put on hot-pink T-shirts, got our lawn chares and a couple packs of hot dogs, and went to the corner and cooked some dinner. We showed up and established a presence in the neighborhood.”²¹¹

Like all abolitionist groups, MASK’s ambitions are twofold: to repair an existing place—in this case a neighborhood plagued by gun and police violence—by providing social services and community-based infrastructures of care, and to create alternative systems of accountability that are designed to replace discriminatory, oppressive institutions like policing. Though these goals are lofty, MASK members “start with needs”: the need for food, the need for social interaction, and the need for public, recreational space.²¹² At the corner of 75th Street and South Steward Avenue, MASK has been serving dinner to around 75 youths, from infants to teenagers, and their family members several times a week since 2015.²¹³ Around the barbecue grill, MASK members create a space of celebration, where kids, who would otherwise be kept indoors by their parents for fear of gun violence, can run around and play freely. Adopting Jane Jacob’s famous provocation that increasing residents’ presence on urban streets will “insure (sic.) the safety of both residents and strangers,” MASK members place their chairs, bodies, and “eyes on the street.”²¹⁴ Though at first glance this act may seem passive, it is in fact very dynamic and extraverted. MASK members are not just sitting in space, but earmarking it for community use, suturing its wounds from instances of homicide and police violence.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Keller Easterling, “Going Wrong,” *E-flux*, December 2019. Accessed online. <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/collectivity/304220/going-wrong/>.

²¹³ Manasseh (2017).

²¹⁴ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and the Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 35.

MASK's work is exceptional in a world where nonprofits and corporations, that claim to have all the answers, funnel cash towards issues of urban poverty and inequality only to exacerbate these situations in other ways. As legal scholar and community organizer Dean Spade has argued, the kind of strings-attached help offered by such institutions "is not designed to get to the root causes of poverty and violence." At best, these companies and nonprofits "put a tiny, inadequate Band-Aid on the massive social wound" that corporate, institutional, and elite greed creates, at worst, they allow the wound to fester while declaring it healed.²¹⁵ MASK's space-praxis is an example of mutual aid—what Spade defines as a "form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts... but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable."²¹⁶ And as such, it is tied into histories of mutual aid and Black radicalism in the United States that had their heyday in the 1960s and early 1970s, among them the history of the Black Panther Party (BPP).

Founded by Black radical activists Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966, the Black Panther Party was started as an organization of armed Black men defending their community against police violence, but quickly grew into a nation-wide network of individuals and social service programs aimed towards furnishing Black communities' material needs. Among these programs were the People's Free Medical Clinics, People's Free Clothes and Shoes programs, People's Liberation Schools, Free Busing to Prisons program, and, perhaps its most wide-reaching initiative—the Free Breakfast for Children

²¹⁵ Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (And The Next)*, (London; New York: Verso, 2020), 21.

²¹⁶ Dean Spade, "Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival," *Social Text* 142 38, no.1 (2020), 136.

program.²¹⁷ Started at Saint Augustine’s Church in Oakland in September 1968, the first Free Breakfast for Children Program merged the BPP’s more militant, anti-state politics with a materialist politics that addressed the urgent issue of child hunger. In the last months of 1969, Panther co-founder Bobby Seale sent out a memo to all forty-five BPP chapters mandating the implementation of a Breakfast Program. At the height of the program’s impact, the BPP was serving food to thousands of children nation-wide each day.²¹⁸

Like the founders of the Free Breakfast for Children Program—Bobby Seale, Earl Neil, and Ruth Beckford—Tamar Manasseh has adopted what geographer Nik Heynen has called the BPP’s “direct action antihunger politics of scale.”²¹⁹ Though Manasseh began MASK’s work at the scale of a particular city block, she quickly began to grow its influence spatially. With the help of other MASK members in Chicago and nation-wide, she has taken her block party model to other Chicago street corners in West Garfield Park, Englewood, and South Chicago “in hopes of encouraging other neighborhoods to try their (MASK’s) approach,”²²⁰ created “small community centers in vacant lots around the city” of Chicago, and supported the founding of another MASK chapters in Staten Island, Evansville, and Memphis.²²¹

²¹⁷ Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 117.

²¹⁸ Nik Heynen, “Bending the Bars of Empire from Every Ghetto for Survival: The Black Panther Party’s Radical Antihunger Politics and Social Reproduction of Scale,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99, no. 2 (2009), 407.

²¹⁹ Heynen, 419.

²²⁰ Tony Briscoe, “Mothers in ‘gang for good’ try to keep youths safe during spring break,” *The Chicago Tribune*, April 13, 2017. Accessed online. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-anti-violence-mothers-spring-break-met-0411-20170412-story.html>.

²²¹ Manasseh (2017).

By building up from the scale of the block, to the city, to the nation, MASK creates an expandable, adaptable model for addressing the root causes of violence: poverty, lack of economic opportunity, and the atomization of neighborhood-wide social networks, the result of racist urban policies like redlining and racial steering. As feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick has noted, this mode of working with scale has expansive political potential. It is through “the social production of scale, the sociogeographic struggle over making boundaries,” she argues, that we might denaturalize the “seemingly hierarchical, bound, self-evident, geographical organization” of space.²²² MASK’s politics are practical, addressing human needs as they present themselves, but they also carry the ability to disturb the seemingly natural social organization, maintenance, and regulation of the built environment.

Spatial Anchors, Mobile Women

MASK’s capacity to disrupt existing social and spatial hierarchies is particularly evident in their anti-policing and anti-privatized education politics. The Chicago Police Department (CPD) is a constant presence in Manasseh’s Englewood neighborhood, and has a stark history of anti-black violence. Between 2010 and 2014, Chicago had the highest number of fatal police-involved shootings in the country, with 70 recorded deaths.²²³ Among the incidents that occurred in the lead-up to MASK’s founding was the murder of Laquan McDonald, a 17-year old African American man who was shot 16

²²² Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 74.

²²³ Andrew Schroedter, “Fatal Shootings By Chicago Police: Tops Among Biggest U.S. Cities,” *Better Government Association*, July 26, 2015. Accessed online. <https://www.bettergov.org/news/fatal-shootings-by-chicago-police-tops-among-biggest-us-cities>

times by Officer Jason Van Dyke on October 20, 2014. McDonald's death ignited a series of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in Chicago, as well as a Department of Justice investigation of the CPD, which called Chicago police officers' general over-use of force "unreasonable."²²⁴ The tragedy also redirected media attention to the almost two decades of CPD-led torture of Black men and women in the 1970s and 1980s, with some survivors like Darrell Cannon publicly recalling the police use of electric cattle prods to force admissions of guilt.²²⁵ In New York City, similar preconditions of anti-Black police violence existed at the founding of the MASK Staten Island chapter, when Eric Garner was murdered by NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo in Staten Island only three months before Laquan McDonald's death.

In a series of New York Times op-eds Manasseh has made MASK's position on policing known: the police aren't the solution to gun violence in Chicago.²²⁶ Everyday residents of Chicago, Manasseh argues, hold the answers:

We... listened to the people there. They told us how to stop gun violence in their neighborhood and pretty much all the other ones just like it. They told us they needed resources, jobs and skills training. They told us they needed schools that could prepare their children to compete in a world that will soon be run by computers. They need a share of that \$95 million planned for a new police and firefighter training center...²²⁷

²²⁴ United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division and the U.S. State Attorney's Office, Northern District of Illinois, "Investigation of the Chicago Police Department," January 13, 2017, page 5.

²²⁵ David Schaper, "With Chicago Police Investigation, Advocates Ask, What Took So Long?," *NPR*, December 8, 2015. Accessed online. <https://www.npr.org/2015/12/08/458926584/with-chicago-police-investigation-advocates-ask-what-took-so-long>.

²²⁶ Tamar Manasseh, "The Police Aren't the Solution to Chicago's Violence," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2018. Accessed online. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/20/opinion/the-police-arent-the-solution-to-chicagos-violence.html?searchResultPosition=8>.

²²⁷ Manasseh (2017).

Though the CPD has worked to curb MASK's efforts, even criminalizing "unsanctioned street parties" in 2018, MASK has furnished the needs Manasseh mentions—resources, education, skills—through the development of a new MASK Community Resource Center.²²⁸ In September 2020, after two years of construction and planning, MASK opened its brick-and-mortar center in a formerly vacant lot on the southwest corner of W. 75th Street and S. Stewart Avenue. The \$60,000, crowdfunded project features a newly paved and landscaped site, and a series of shipping containers that have been transformed into classrooms and meeting spaces. The construction project was a community effort, with local construction contractors as well as residents chipping in to pour the concrete slab, stabilize the shipping containers, complete interior renovations, and paint the exterior walls of the containers-turned-resource centers.²²⁹

In addition to returning urban space to the Englewood community for collective use, the MASK Chicago Community Resource Center fills a void in an educational landscape that has been completely transformed by neoliberal policy. Proposed and instituted a decade ago by Chicago's former mayor Richard Daley and the leaders of the Commercial Club of Chicago, the Renaissance 2010 policy initiative laid the groundwork for the closing of 60 to 70 public schools in Chicago and the opening of 100 new schools, almost 70 of which were designated to be run by private companies.²³⁰ The project was predicated on a hypothesis that student academic performance in historically low

²²⁸ Jeremy Gornier, "Chicago cops to target 'large, unsanctioned street parties' in effort to tackle violence," *The Chicago Tribune*, August 9, 2018. Accessed online. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/breaking/ct-met-chicago-police-large-gatherings-20180809-story.html>.

²²⁹ MASK developed a partnership with Chicago firm Benchmark Construction, which poured the concrete slab and stabilized the containers for use.

²³⁰ Pauline Lipman and Nathan Haines, "From Accountability to Privatization and African American Exclusion: Chicago's 'Renaissance 2010'," *Educational Policy* 21, no. 3 (2007), 471.

performing schools would increase more rapidly under a private management model than a public one. While lauded by Chicago's business leaders and upper-and-middle class, Renaissance 2010 has been heavily contested by Black and Latinx community members in Chicago's South Side neighborhoods, who point out the policy's many compounding effects: the diminishing of social bonds in communities where public schools are both educational centers and spaces for social, political, and economic self-organization; the increasing difficulty of attendance for students who were once located in the same neighborhood as their school, and now must travel farther afield using Chicago's insufficient public transportation infrastructures; and the accelerating impact of gentrification in low income neighborhoods.²³¹ As one resident of Manasseh's Englewood stated in a 2005 community meeting about Renaissance 2010: "When you destroy a community's school, you destroy a community."²³²

While the city of Chicago has invested millions of dollars into the development of a new police station, market-rate and luxury housing, and a shopping district in Englewood during the first decade of the 21st century, residents have faced an 80% increase in property tax rates, and around a 40% increase in housing foreclosures.²³³ MASK's more modest, grassroots tactics suggest a sustainable alternative to the boom-and-bust cycles of private real estate investment, as well as a method for decoupling the

²³¹ In an interview, education researcher Lance Williams noted that the distance between new schools and young Black male students in particular has triggered a whole array of specific issues. Because street organizations in some neighborhoods in Chicago regulate where certain Black youth can and cannot go, many of these youth have found themselves unable to attend school for fear of crossing political lines. See: Lance Williams and Tamar Manasseh interviewed by Nick Schifrin, "How Chicago communities are trying to stop gun violence," PBS New Hour, August 7, 2018. Accessed online. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-chicago-communities-are-trying-to-stop-gun-violence>.

²³² Quoted in Lipman and Haines, 490.

²³³ Lipman and Haines, 488.

process of rebuilding from the process of displacement. Whereas in mainstream discourse the term “rebuilding” has been “rooted in the demonization of the low-income African Americans to be displaced,” in MASK’s work, rebuilding is a reparative mode of space-praxis that is centered on the self-determination of communities, whose residents are given the authority to design new spaces and socio-political institutions.²³⁴

MASK’s use of their Community Resource Center and recurring block parties as spatial anchors in their network of accountability and care reflect the space-praxis of the Black Panther Party in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Panther chapters across the country were carving out space for operations headquarters, schools, breakfast programs, and health clinics. Panther free health clinics in particular—what Party members called People’s Free Medical Clinics (PFMCs)—served as brick-and-mortar locations where the Party could organize its health initiatives as well as a broader array of social services. As BPP historian Alondra Nelson has stated, the PFMCs were “spaces in which medical care was central but not the sole aim.”²³⁵ Prior to BPP co-founder Bobby Seale’s 1970 directive that all Party chapters establish a free clinic, PFMCs had opened in Kansas City, Missouri; Chicago; Seattle; Portland; and Los Angeles. By 1973, fifteen Panther clinics existed in thirteen U.S. cities, including New York City, Cleveland, Boston, Winston-Salem, Philadelphia, New Haven, Berkeley, and Washington D.C.²³⁶ Among the most productive PFMCs was Chicago’s Spurgeon ‘Jake’ Winters clinic, which claimed over 1,400 regular, registered patients²³⁷, and screened over 7,000 Chicago residents for sickle

²³⁴ Lipman and Haines, 492.

²³⁵ Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 79.

²³⁶ Nelson, 90-91.

²³⁷ Turner, “Free Health Clinics: A New Concept?,” *American Journal of Public Health* 62 (October, 1972), 1350.

cell anemia—a blood cell disorder that particularly afflicted African Americans—by 1972.²³⁸

Much in the way that MASK activists located their Community Resource Center in the middle of a neighborhood where public schools had been shuttered, and educational services no longer geographically accessible, the BPP clinics “offered a local option” for medical care “in contrast to health facilities that were often great distances from black communities.”²³⁹ All PFMCs required a broad network of personnel to keep them functioning on a daily basis; staffers included BPP rank-and-file members, Leftist allies, sympathetic professionals in the medical community, and local business-people who were willing to donate money and supplies. Women Black Panthers had an outsized influence on the establishment and day-to-day maintenance of the PFMCs. In addition to making up much of the clinical staff in these spaces, many Panther women founded and led the clinics—among them Catherine Showell, who served as the Health Coordinator of the Washington D.C. PFMC, as well as Frances Carter, Carolyn Jones, and Rosemary Mealy, who established the New Haven PFMC.²⁴⁰

Like MASK-members, Panther women and their colleagues very rarely purchased or rented existing clinical spaces.²⁴¹ Instead, they repurposed other spaces, like “storefronts or trailers... renovating the sites and converting them into workable clinics.”²⁴² The MASK educational resource center bears particular aesthetic resemblance

²³⁸ Turner, 1348.

²³⁹ Nelson, 78.

²⁴⁰ Yohuru Williams, “No Haven: From Civil Rights to Black Power in New Haven, Connecticut, 1956-1971,” (PhD diss., Howard University 1998), 272-273.

²⁴¹ An exception to this is Seattle’s Sidney Miller PFMC, which occupied an expensive clinical space that was donated to the Party’s Seattle chapter by a wealthy patron.

²⁴² Nelson, 92.

to Boston's Franklin Lynch PFMC, which occupied a trailer parked on the corner of Tremont St. and Ruggles St. in the Roxbury neighborhood. The interior of the Franklin Lynch PFMC, which would've been empty when the Panther's purchased it, save for its linoleum tile flooring and wood veneer covered wall, was appropriated and reimagined by Black Panther clinicians. They brought, found, purchased, and borrowed medical furniture for the space, and populated the walls with BPP iconography, posters created by the Party's graphic designer Emory Douglas, and photographs of Panther clinicians and community members.

Black Panthers were also mobile in their approach to achieving health equity and justice. When patients' needs exceeded what the PFMC could provide, they were often assigned a 'patient advocate'— a party-member or ally that could accompany individuals to appointments at hospitals or private medical facilities. Most developed in Chicago, the patient advocate system was intended to reshape the relationship between Black patients and their medical professionals. Panther advocates would ensure that their representee be seen in a timely matter, that doctors and nurses treat them with respect, and that they received clear medical advice.²⁴³ With a consistent, brick-and-mortar space for organizing medical care, the Panthers were able to extend their network of influence across medical institutions in cities all over the U.S.

In Staten Island, NY, a satellite chapter of MASK has adopted a similarly mobile approach of grassroots organizing in the borough's North Shores. The specific approach of these women and mothers to issues of neighborhood violence and poverty is particularly apparent because it emerged in contrast to a 'sibling,' male-led organization

²⁴³ Nelson, 109.

Occupy the Block.²⁴⁴ Beginning their work in 2015, members of Occupy the Block sat on a street corner notorious for gun violence from 8pm to midnight on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays to prevent violence. In 2016, neighborhood women formed MASK Staten Island to address the same issues of neighborhood violence, but rather than staying in place, the women began spending summer days walking around Staten Island, offering knowledge and resources to individuals and families they met along the way. This proactive work, centered on mobility and knowledge sharing, is one form of designing what Patricia Hill Collins has called “organized, resilient, women-centered networks of bloodmothers and othermothers.”²⁴⁵ Moving from block to block, neighborhood to neighborhood, MASK Staten Island women have grown their kinship network through the process of mutual aid—sharing resources that range from free swimming lessons for children to opportunities for employment. This approach has less to do with occupying space, or establishing control over a city block, and more to do with linking spaces, individuals, and resources in a web-like system of mutuality and interdependency. Though Manasseh’s MASK chapter in Chicago is more spatially anchored than MASK Staten Island, with its resource center serving as a social nucleus, it maintains this ethos of mobility as its members host block parties at different intersections in the city’s South Side.

The lineage of space-praxes that have been drawn between the Black Panther Party and MASK are connected in their emphasis on mutual aid, but they are also both linked to the institution of Black motherhood. By placing Black women and mothers in

²⁴⁴ All information about MASK Staten Island was gathered in a phone interview with a member of the organization, conducted by the author on February 4, 2021.

²⁴⁵ Collins (2000), 178.

the role of movement leadership, the BPP and MASK have harnessed a set of intergenerational knowledge and practices that take on social reproduction as a basis for organizing. As Manasseh states, her spatial approach to community organizing is

not exactly an avant-garde idea. I learned it from my mom, who learned it from hers, and so on, back until what I would imagine was the dawn of time. This has always been the role of the black mother in the community. We watch the kids. All of them. This is that ‘village’ that we hear so much about but that has somehow been forgotten. All I’ve done is try to revive its spirit.²⁴⁶

This generational village-making and village-maintaining mentality is not a biological or natural condition of Black motherhood, but instead it arises out of Black motherhood’s social context. Thrust into the roles of provider, worker, head of household, and community leader, Black women have developed a set of skills that are indispensable in the process of building new infrastructures of care—whether those be physical spaces designed for community use, or social networks that center community safety, education, and needs. These spatial-social tools for activist praxis are present in the work of the BPP and MASK, but they also exist in other Black feminist movements, among them a newly-formed movement for housing justice started by a group of Black mothers confronting the California Bay Area housing crisis.

Moms for Housing & the Fight for Shelter

At 5:15 A.M. on January 14, 2020, the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team from the Alameda County Police Department broke down the door of a West Oakland home at 2928 Magnolia Street. Armed with AR-15s, they escorted four unarmed individuals—Misty Cross, Tolani King, Jesse Turner, and Walter Baker—out of the

²⁴⁶ Manasseh (2017).

home in front of a group of reporters who had assembled there to capture the spectacle on tape.²⁴⁷ Though evictions have become part of everyday life in Oakland, with 28,228 unlawful detainer notices having been filed between 2005 and 2015 alone, this event received exceptional attention because of the detainees' political alliances with the organization Moms for Housing—a now world-renowned activist collective advocating for a universal basic right to housing.²⁴⁸

Moms for Housing (M4H) was founded in late 2019 by a small group of Oakland-based homeless and marginally housed Black mothers with the goal of reclaiming “housing for the community from speculators and profiteers.”²⁴⁹ Members Dominique Walker and Sameerah Karim began the group's activist work by occupying an empty home in West Oakland on November 18 of that year, inviting Misty Cross and other individuals into the home over the subsequent eight weeks. Owned by Wedgewood Properties Management, a California real estate company that describes itself as being interested in flipping “distressed residential real estate,” the house on 2928 Magnolia Street had been uninhabited for almost two years, during which time eviction, displacement, and homelessness statistics continued to balloon in Oakland.²⁵⁰ The vacancy of this home, however, was not an aberration in the Oakland housing market, but reflective of a more consistent trend in real estate acquisition, in which speculators purchase properties (often at foreclosure auctions) and keep them off the market for

²⁴⁷ Misty Cross and Tolani King are both founding members of Moms for Housing, whereas Jesse Turner and Walter Baker are both allies of the movement.

²⁴⁸ Anti-Eviction Mapping Project and Tenants Together, “Oakland Unlawful Detainer Evictions,” (c. 2020). Accessed online: <http://www.antievictionmappingproject.net/oakland.html>.

²⁴⁹ Moms for Housing Website, <https://moms4housing.org/aboutm4h>.

²⁵⁰ Quoted in Jonny Coleman's article “How a Collective of Mothers Flipped the Script on Housing,” *The Nation* (January 24, 2020).

months, sometimes years, until they arrive at the most lucrative moment to re-enter the housing market. The fact that there are currently four times as many empty houses in Oakland as there are unhoused individuals is, in large part, the result of this exploitative practice.²⁵¹ The Moms' decision to move into 2928 Magnolia Street, as Dominique Walker described it, was both a way of drawing media attention to this bleak reality, as well as a practical means of attaining shelter.²⁵²

While M4H started with the actions of just a few women, it exploded into a city-wide movement in January of 2020, as Wedgewood, in conjunction with the Oakland Sheriff's Office and Oakland Police Department, threatened the Moms inhabiting 2928 Magnolia Street with eviction. In early January of 2020, the Moms filed a right to possession claim on the property, which was shortly thereafter denied, giving Wedgewood a legal avenue for forcibly removing the women and their children from the home. On January 13, representatives from the Oakland Sheriff's Office announced that they planned to evict the Moms that evening. In response, a grassroots collective of M4H supporters, calling themselves the Moms House Solidarity Committee, sent a text blast to over 1,800 allies, notifying them of the impending eviction and calling on them to defend the Moms & their home.²⁵³ Within minutes, hundreds of people congregated on the front lawn of the Moms' house, creating a human barricade around the edifice. One group of individuals on the property's street front held a banner that captured the sentiments of the

²⁵¹ Adam Brinkow, "San Francisco has nearly five empty homes per homeless resident," *Curbed San Francisco*, December 3, 2019. <https://sf.curbed.com/2019/12/3/20993251/san-francisco-bay-area-vacant-homes-per-homeless-count>.

²⁵² Rachel Hahn, "These Moms Fought for a Home—And Started a Movement," *Vogue*, May 12, 2020. <https://www.vogue.com/article/moms-4-housing>.

²⁵³ Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez, "Moms 4 Housing: Meet the Oakland Mothers Facing Eviction After Two Months of Occupying Vacant House," *Democracy Now*, January 14, 2020. https://www.democracynow.org/2020/1/14/oakland_california_moms_4_housing.

crowd: “WE STAND WITH THE MOMS.” While the spectacular show of solidarity on the Moms’ front lawn deterred the police from coming to the home that evening, they arrived early the next morning, removing the women and their children from the home in a display of brute force.

Though the story of the Moms’ fight for 2928 Magnolia Street ended in tactical success when Wedgewood executives, under immense public scrutiny, decided to return the home to the Moms only a week after their eviction, the Moms’ efforts represented, and ignited, a broader movement for housing justice in Oakland and across the U.S. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, and the resulting, government-sanctioned shelter-in-place orders, the Moms’ demand for a universal basic right to housing gained a new sense of urgency and velocity. Unbeknownst to them, the Moms had set a precedent for pandemic housing justice activism to come in the months before the Coronavirus gripped the U.S. Taking inspiration from M4H, a group of mostly Latinx residents in Los Angeles’ El Sereno neighborhood moved into several vacant homes owned by the California Transportation Authority (CalTrans), which had been stockpiling real estate in the neighborhood for decades in anticipation of a potential expansion of the 710 Freeway. In New York City, members of the Metropolitan Council on Housing, a tenants’ rights organization funded in 1959, successfully pressured Mayor Bill de Blasio to place a freeze on evictions during the pandemic, a move that is now seen as foundational to a more sweeping call for housing as a basic human right. In more dire circumstances, New York housing organizers have coordinated eviction blockades over

the course of 2020, modeling their tactics after the Moms House Solidarity Committee, as well as earlier anti-eviction activist campaigns in the city.²⁵⁴

Housing justice activism has a long history in the United States. Chapter 1 of this thesis touched, in brief, on a few tenants' rights and squatting movements that inspired, and in some instances operated in coordination with, neighboring women's centers. These housing activists included the Puerto Rican and Dominican members of "Operation Move-in," an anti-capitalist, squatters' rights movement on New York's Upper West Side; the Cooper Square Development Committee, which protected Lower East Side tenants against Robert Moses' 1959 slum clearance plan; and the Riverside Planning Committee, which fought against Harvard University's dispossessive real estate practices in the early 1970s.²⁵⁵ The Black Panther Party also made their commitment to housing justice explicit during this period of time. In fact, one of the points in their Ten-Point Program—the foundational text that guided the political philosophy and operative goals of the Party—read: "We want decent housing, fit for the shelter of human beings."²⁵⁶ These housing justice movements, among many others in U.S. history, have, with varying degrees of militancy, argued against the commodification of housing under capitalism. The persistent call for housing as a human right made by these organizations and M4H exudes the ethos of anti-capitalist political praxis, which asserts that "the direct

²⁵⁴ 53 Jonah Engel Bromwich, "The Evictions are Coming. Housing Activists are Ready," *The New York Times*, December 23, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/23/style/rent-evictions-new-york.html>.

²⁵⁵ For more on Operation Move-In, see: Rose Muzio, "The Struggle against 'Urban Renewal' in Manhattan's Upper West Side and the Emergence of El Comité," *Centro Journal* XXI, no. 2 (2009): 104-141; for more on the Cooper Square Development Committee, see: Marci Reaven, "Neighborhood Activism in Planning for New York City, 1945-1975," *Journal of Urban History* 46, no. 6 (2017): 1261-1289.

²⁵⁶ Black Panther Party, "Ten Point Program," *The Black Panther* 3, no. 7 (June 1969), 1.

provision of adequate value for all (housing, education, food security, etc.) takes precedence over their provision through a profit-maximizing market system that concentrates exchange values in a few hand and allocates goods on the basis of ability to pay.”²⁵⁷

What separates M4H from other anti-capitalist activist collectives is its centering of Black mothers in the movement for housing justice. This shift does not change the goal of their activism, which remains the procurement of free shelter for all. However, it raises critical questions about the history of the U.S. home as a race-making and gender-making construct. M4H’s vision for the future of housing is not just a call for expanded access to housing, but also a call for the abolition of gendered and racialized labor that the modern U.S. home depends on to reproduce itself.

At Home with Paradoxical Space

Houses, as social theorists Paula Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira da Silva have noted, are “unsettling hybrid structures” in which inhabitants may be simultaneously subjected to the power of racist/sexist systems and afforded shelter from those very systems.²⁵⁸ For M4H, their claimed home on 2928 Magnolia Street, affectionately called “Mom’s House,” proves no exception to this rule. It is both the site where racial and gendered divisions of labor have been produced and sustained, and a space of reclaimed refuge from the outside world of predatory real estate speculation and eviction practices.

²⁵⁷ David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 294.

²⁵⁸ Paula Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira da Silva “Accumulation, Dispossession, and Debt: The Racial Logic of Global Capitalism—An Introduction,” *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2012), 362.

The edifice on Magnolia Street has the racialized baggage of the U.S. housing industry mixed into its concrete foundation. Built in 1911, the house was constructed at a time when Oakland's residents were primarily white. Only a year after its construction, Oakland city planners designated the region it was in, at the nexus of the city's seaport and railroad terminus, as an industrial zone, marking it as a less desirable space for residential use.²⁵⁹ Poor people, people of color, and immigrants made homes there, in one of the only neighborhoods they could afford to pay rent, despite the environmental pollution and cramped quarters. In 1937, the Home Owner's Loan Corporation 'red-lined' the West Oakland neighborhood where Mom's House is located, giving it the lowest security grade classification—a "D" rating—and noting the neighborhood's new, "heterogeneous mixture of all races" as one of its "detrimental influences."²⁶⁰ As was the case in Black, immigrant, and low income neighborhoods all over the country, this classification was weaponized by mortgage lenders, who used it to justify their decisions to refuse West Oakland residents housing loans for decades to follow. At the height of the postwar era, the Black population of Oakland grew exponentially, with newcomers seeking employment in Oakland's booming railroad and maritime industries. While white residents moved into federally subsidized housing in Bay Area suburbs in the 1950s, 80% of the Black population remained in West Oakland. In 1962, as the fervor of urban renewal took hold in municipal planning departments across the country, the Oakland

²⁵⁹ Katie Ferrari, "The house on Magnolia Street," Curbed San Francisco, April 29, 2020. <https://sf.curbed.com/2020/4/29/21240456/moms-4-housing-oakland-house-history>.

²⁶⁰ Robert K. Nelson, LaDale Winling, Richard Marciano, Nathan Connolly, et al., "Mapping Inequality," American Panorama, ed. Robert K. Nelson and Edward L. Ayers, accessed January 14, 2021, <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=14/37.822/122.288&city=oakland-ca&area=D8&adimage=4/79.457/-161.104.com/2020/4/29/21240456/moms-4-housing-oakland-house-history>.

Redevelopment Agency leveled much of West Oakland's Acorn neighborhood (a mile south of Mom's House), displacing almost 9000 residents.²⁶¹ It was there, in the rubble, that city planners built a large public housing complex nicknamed "the corns," the site of Black Panther Party leader Huey Newton's murder twenty-seven years later. For the remaining decades of the 20th century, the Mom's House continued to weather anti-Black police violence, landlord neglect, and racial steering.

With the outfall of the 2008 mortgage-lending crisis, West Oakland residents faced a new affront to Black homeownership. "Lacking property and stocks passed down through generations and burdened by greater reliance on consumer credit," Black and Latinx borrowers were hit hardest by the crumbling of the housing market.²⁶² In an interview with Democracy Now reporters Amy Goodman and Juan González, Carroll Fife, a M4H ally and Director of the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE), characterized the lasting effects of the subprime mortgage crisis on West Oakland residents this way:

After the housing crisis...of 2008, many homeowners lost their primary residences—their only residences—and so that allowed speculators in the banks that were bailed out by the government at that time to come in and scoop up homes at rock bottom prices. That is still happening. We are still experiencing the impacts of the foreclosure crisis with speculators owning 35% of the housing stock in America. Some state that Oakland has the worst speculation crisis in the country, and that's observable by how high the rents are. You have the median one bedroom, market-rate unit starting at around twenty-five hundred dollars a month. The housing wage, which is different than the minimum wage or living wage, in Alameda County where Oakland is located is \$40.88/hour, and that is out of reach for many of Oakland's working class people.²⁶³

²⁶¹ Chris Rhomberg, *No There: Race, Class, and Political Community in Oakland* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2004), 121.

²⁶² Chakravartty and Ferreira da Silva, 362

²⁶³ Carroll Fife, interviewed by Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez, *Democracy Now*, January 14, 2020.

The house on 2928 Magnolia Street was one of many homes in West Oakland to succumb to the tides of real estate speculation in the outfall of the 2008 financial crisis—a norm, not an aberration. The price of Mom’s House has been on a steady incline since ‘08, having increased almost 400% in the last eight years alone.²⁶⁴

Yet despite all of its entanglements with histories of racism and primitive accumulation, Mom’s House has, since November 2019, become a symbol of resistance to real estate speculation captured in architectural form. The front porch and front lawn of 2928 Magnolia Street are spaces of particular political significance. As activist and academic Laura McTighe has argued, Black women have long used the front porch as a space for building interpersonal relationships and political movements. Placed in the “interstices between home and street, between private and public, between collective and intimate,” the front porch/front lawn has, for the women of Moms for Housing, become a site where their broader political movement coexists and comingles with their individual material needs.²⁶⁵ When the Moms and their allies gathered on the front porch/front lawn of 2928 Magnolia Street, they linked the Mom’s demand for adequate housing for their families with a broader call for housing as a basic human right.

In addition to bringing people together physically, by making the front lawn a public site of neighborhood protest, the house reached an international audience online, through articles and social media posts. In fact, almost 60% of Google Images results for “Moms for Housing,” a search which yields hundreds of relevant images in sum, feature

²⁶⁴ This number is based on a Zillow estimate of the home’s cost over the last decade. Because there is not concrete data on the annual pricing of the home (it often sat off the market unpriced), these numbers rely mostly on neighborhood-wide pricing data.

²⁶⁵ Laura McTighe with Deon Haywood, “Front Porch Revolution: Resilience Space, Demonic Grounds, and the Horizons of a Black Feminist Otherwise,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44, no. 1 (2018), 40.

Mom’s House—sometimes standing alone with protest signage hung on its façade, other times pictured in the background with members of M4H and their co-conspirators congregating in the front lawn.²⁶⁶ Other housing activists, like the aforementioned Los Angeles tenants of the El Sereno neighborhood, have adopted M4H’s approach of appropriating architecture to political ends. In an image that ran at the top of a March 2020 article in *The New Yorker* on COVID-19 and housing justice, one “reclaimed” El Sereno home was pictured with a banner hung from the portico columns, emblazoned with the words “SHELTER IN THE STORM.”²⁶⁷

Both a site of oppression and resistance, of gendered/racialized histories and abolitionist futures, Mom’s House is an example of what feminist geographer Gillian Rose has called paradoxical space: spaces “that would be mutually exclusive if charted on a two-dimensional map” and yet are “occupied simultaneously.”²⁶⁸ Paradoxical space represents a dense, multi-layered region where power, domination, refusal and insurgent struggle exist simultaneously. It is the thickened space where white, bourgeois, heterosexual and masculine geographies overlap with non-white, poor, non-heterosexual, and feminine geographies—a knotty entanglement that does not result in the negation of these two forces, as they were never pure opposites in the first place, but rather their multiplication. Paradoxical space exists in the everyday landscapes that women negotiate—from “kitchens and bedrooms,” to “streets and workplaces and

²⁶⁶ Based on a quick calculation by the author, made based off of Google Images results on January 28, 2021, 5:00PM EST.

²⁶⁷ Dana Goodyear, “The Coronavirus spurs a movement of people reclaiming vacant homes” *The New Yorker*, March 28, 2020. Accessed online. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/california-chronicles/the-coronavirus-spurs-a-movement-of-people-re-claiming-vacant-homes>.

²⁶⁸ Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 140.

neighborhoods.”²⁶⁹ It is this dense, compounding experience of space that the Combahee River Collective invokes when they claimed that they “find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously.”²⁷⁰

Rose gives us the queer trope of being either ‘in’ or ‘out’ of the closet as an example of paradoxical space. Though the spatial dimensions of the closet appear dumb and binary at first glance—you’re either in or out—feminist literary theorist Diana Fuss complicates this notion. “To be out,” Fuss alleges, “is really to be in – inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible.”²⁷¹ The queer subject can never be truly outside or inside, but is always occupying both spaces at the same time. While this confounding position of in-outness, or out-inness, can indeed be difficult, even painful, it also holds within it a subversive potentiality—the possibility of, to paraphrase Fuss, using up and exhausting the terms ‘in’ and ‘out,’ and the spatial polarities they represent. It gestures toward the possibility of inhabiting the horizontal space between extremes, a position from which subjects can both account for the spatialization of hegemonic (racist, homophobic, sexist) power and still “insist on the possibility of resistance.”²⁷²

Feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick attests to the subversive potential of paradoxical space in her book *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* when she takes up the story of Harriet Jacobs, an enslaved woman in North Carolina who hides in her grandmother’s house to escape the brutality of the plantation,

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ (italics by author); Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nocholson (New York: Routledge, 1997 [1977]), 65.

²⁷¹ Quoted in Rose, 151.

²⁷² Rose, 155.

and later records the experience in an autobiography under the penname Lisa Brent.²⁷³ Jacobs is confined to her grandmother's attic, or 'garret,' a cramped 9' X 7' X 3' space for seven years.²⁷⁴ The garret is a paradoxical space because it is both the site of Jacobs' self-confinement and her "loophole of retreat." It is the site of pain—where "her limbs are benumbed by inaction; she loses the power of speech;" and "remains unconscious for sixteen hours"—suspended in a geography of racial and sexual domination under slavery.²⁷⁵ Yet McKittrick notes that Jacobs:

claims that in the garret she is not enslaved and that her loophole of retreat is a retreat to emancipation. For Brent to declare that her emancipation begins in the garret—which she also repeatedly refers to as her dismal cell, prison, and this dark hole—is evidence of how she uses the existing landscape and architecture to name the complicated geographies of black womanhood in/and slavery.²⁷⁶

It is there, in the paradoxical space of the garret—a space of confinement and escape, pain and solace—where Jacobs is able to articulate her "emancipatory desires, without losing sight of the dehumanizing forces of slavery."²⁷⁷ For McKittrick, as well as other critical race scholars like Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman, Jacobs' story has been central to theorizing Black feminist conceptions of resistance, in both political and spatial terms.

As a paradoxical space, Mom's House is simultaneously a refuge from the bleak reality of homelessness that the speculative real estate market has fueled, and a product of that very market. While Mom's House hosts specific stories of real estate speculation and anti-capitalist resistance, it is also connected to much broader histories of race, gender,

²⁷³ See: Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, [1861] 1987).

²⁷⁴ McKittrick, 37.

²⁷⁵ McKittrick, 40.

²⁷⁶ McKittrick, 41.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

and housing discrimination in the United States. Chapter 1 of this thesis briefly touched on these nationwide histories in and through the work of Chandan Reddy. In “Home, Houses, Nonidentity: Paris is Burning,” Reddy argues that “housing in the United States is one site in which the State and the capitalist ‘market’ produce and maintain ‘racial formations.’”²⁷⁸ This is evidenced by a history of racialized labor within White, middle- and-upper-class American homes, wherein women of color have shouldered the burden of reproductive labor: childcare, cooking, and housekeeping. The ‘racial formations’ produced by the housing market are also made plain through the historical circumscription of home ownership to the white, male citizen.

Today in California’s Bay Area, developers on both sides of the contemporary debate around the housing crisis—pro-development and anti-development—have vested themselves in the preservation and maintenance of white housing landscapes. NIMBY (Not in My Backyard) politics have a long, racist history in the Bay Area, as wealthy residents have claimed their entitlement to views of the San Francisco Bay as a way of reinforcing building height limits and preventing the building of new public and low-income housing. In self-professed opposition to NIMBY-identifying residents, pro-development YIMBY (Yes in My Backyard) advocates, who are backed by Bay Area Tech companies pledging billions of dollars to new housing development, claim to be allies of working class residents—advocating in word and policy for the development of more market-rate housing. Yet urban planners Erin McElroy and Andrew Szeto have astutely argued that, while the dispositions of NIMBY-advocates and YIMBY-advocates may be opposing, YIMBY sentiments involve the same “racist exclusionary strategy

²⁷⁸ Reddy, 359.

exemplified by NIMBYism.” The not-so-distinct application of YIMBY/NIMBY real estate logics is reflected in the actions of the Bay Area Renters’ Federation, a pro-development (YIMBY) organization, which has, for example,

...supported the developer Maximus’s market-rate construction of what would be the largest complex in San Francisco’s Mission District, notoriously referred to as the “Monster in the Mission.” Crucial to the 16th Street Plaza development plan is the private contract with Clean Up the Plaza Coalition, intended to rid the plaza of “undesirables.” Led by Jack Davis, a man famous for supporting multiple mayors and development plans, the coalition has overtly characterized plaza occupants as pathogenic and criminal. According to Davis, “When you start mixing it all, then the criminal element can hide within this landscape of poverty. I’m not dissing homeless people, but when you have two to three hundred homeless people, plus the SROs, plus the urine and feces, plus gang violence, it’s unacceptable to me as a person.”²⁷⁹

Even within pro-development circles in San Francisco, the racialized and classed exclusion of certain bodies from space is sustained. The dispossessive mechanisms of YIMBY/NIMBY politics & geographies are compounded by the fact that, while the city of San Francisco has exceeded its quota of market-rate housing development, it has failed to meet established quotas for low income housing development. The push for more housing is not, in fact, addressing the needs of low income, homeless, or marginally housed individuals, rather it is providing quality housing for newcomers to the city with secure, white collar jobs.

On the morning of Tuesday, January 7, 2020, Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf and California State Senator Scott Wiener announced Senate Bill 50 (SB50), the “More HOMES Act,”²⁸⁰ in front of Oakland’s city hall. Schaaf and Wiener were met by a clash

²⁷⁹ Erin McElroy and Andrew Szeto, “The Racial Contours of YIMBY/NIMBY Bay Area Gentrification,” *Berkeley Planning Journal* 29, no. 1 (2017), 24.

²⁸⁰ Senate Bill 50 was brought to the California State Senate in March 2019. The bill calls for the streamlining of ministerial approval on multifamily housing projects in major transit corridors of San Francisco. It provides incentives for the production of housing units for “very low, low-, or moderate-income households,” but is not specific about the number of units that would be

of two opposing groups, a collection of contented, pro-development advocates who are part of the group Yimby Action, and Moms 4 Housing members, protesting the bill with chants like “Hey, ho, luxury housing has got to go” and “Where’s the affordable housing?”²⁸¹ Government officials were, by and large, baffled by the Moms’ contestations. In a tweet that same day, San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo remarked:

Am puzzled to see @moms4housing take such an adversarial posture toward #SB50, which could do more to produce affordable and accessible housing than virtually any other bill in the last decade. There’s room for all of us to push together w/ @ Scott_Wiener26²⁸²

But the Moms had made their position clear, in protest, writing, and collective action. In a tweet the day before, the Moms clarified:

Trickle down housing does not make it to the streets; to the places where people who need extremely low-to-no income housing and are just as deserving as everyone else.²⁸³

While SB50 promised a state-wide increase on building height limits in urban areas, a move that would encourage the growth of market rate housing, it made few provisions the kind of below-market rate housing that would meaningfully impact the lives of the homeless and marginally housed. More to the point, it failed to meet the Moms’ ultimate goal: the decommodification of housing in the Bay Area.

produced for these families and how many would be made specifically for the lowest income individuals (including homeless individuals and families). Housing experts and critics of the bill have been quick to point out that increasing the number of housing units in the Bay Area will not necessarily moderate the price pressures of the housing market. Other factors include growth in population, the growing influence of tech companies in the city, and general disparities in the job market.

²⁸¹ Marisa Kendall, “Protesters take over press conference announcing new California housing bill,” The Mercury News, January 7, 2020. Accessed May 7, 2020.

<https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/01/07/moms-4-housing-takes-over-press-conference-announcing-new-housing-bill/>.

²⁸² Sam Liccardo, Twitter Post, January 7, 2020, 2:35 p.m., <https://twitter.com/sliccardo/>

²⁸³ Moms 4 Housing, Twitter Post, January 6, 2020, 11:13 p.m.,

<https://twitter.com/moms4housing/>

If Mom's House is embedded in a longer history of racialized, discriminatory real estate practices, so too is their labor of maintenance and housekeeping embedded in a longer history of racialized domestic labor. In January of 2020, M4H invited reporters into their home. Guiding the film crew around the house, Dominique Walker admitted with a twinge of exhaustion: "We had to do a lot of fixing of this house, and we are still working on it. This house was not kept up to code."²⁸⁴ Unsurprisingly M4H, like many Black women before them, were assigned the labor of repairing broken spaces and systems, with Wedgewood Properties evading this responsibility.

Yet space-praxes of maintenance and repair have not only been hallmarks of racial and gendered domination, but also liberative practices of Black feminist resistance. As feminist theorist bell hooks notes, housework is a paradoxical sort of work because it is, on the one hand, an unpaid, or undervalued form of labor, and on the other, a potentially emancipatory practice which "contributes to individual wellbeing," and "promotes the development of aesthetics" that can work towards "an affirmation of one's identity rather than a negation."²⁸⁵ Reorganizing, redesigning, and reimagining the home has long served as a means of recuperating agency, of imagining the material world otherwise. While the white home has served as a space of oppression for white women—as housewives—and to a greater extent Black and immigrant women—as housemaids and caretakers—the Black homeplace, hooks argues, has been as a site where Black resistance against racist hegemony is cultivated, in spite of pervasive racial apartheid:

This task of making homeplace was not simply a matter of black women providing service; it was about the construction of a safe place where black

²⁸⁴ Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez, "Moms 4 Housing: Meet the Oakland Mothers Facing Eviction After Two Months Occupying Vacant House."

²⁸⁵ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From the Margin to the Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 103.

people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination. We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that "homeplace," most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits. This task of making a homeplace, of making home a community of resistance, has been shared by black women globally, especially black women in white supremacist societies.²⁸⁶

M4H's radical project of making a homeplace at 2928 Magnolia Street is, as hooks suggests, indicative of a more expansive practice of nurturing a community of resistance. Over the last year, the Moms have employed architects and builders to get their house up to code and to reimagine it as a collective "refuge for moms and babies without homes."²⁸⁷ They have also worked with the Oakland Community Land Trust to remove the property the house sits on from the speculative real estate market.²⁸⁸ Like the eighteen other community land trusts (CLTs) in California, and many more around the world, the Oakland CLT allows local, BIPOC and low-income residents to purchase homes that sit on communally managed land, either individually or as a co-operative. When the Mom's decide to sell their home at 2928 Magnolia Street, for example, they will either resell to the CLT, or to another household that meets the income eligibility requirements established by the CLT, at a below-market rate determined by an agreed upon formula at the initial sale of the home.²⁸⁹ With oversight from the community, the

²⁸⁶ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 42.

²⁸⁷ Moms4Housing, Instagram Post, January 18, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CKNulffBvXP/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

²⁸⁸ The Oakland Community Land Trust was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in January 2009, in direct response to the foreclosure crisis. Over the last 12 years of operation, the OakCLT has managed almost 40 properties in the Oakland metro area. In addition to single family homes, their portfolio of properties includes several mixed use projects like the Hasta Muerta Coffee Building.

²⁸⁹ Kenneth Temkin, Brett Theodos, and David Price, "Balancing Affordability and Opportunity: An Evaluation of Affordable Homeownership Programs with Longterm Affordability Controls: Cross-Site Report," (Washington DC: The Urban Institute, October 2020), 2-3.

Oakland CLT has attempted to better balance “needs of individuals and families to build wealth with the long-term goal of permanently preserving affordability.”²⁹⁰

Though a tool of many communities around the world, land trusts have a feminist history as well. Among the many notable women-led land trusts in the U.S. are the Mississippi Freedom Farms and the Oregon Women’s Land Trust. Founded by southern Civil Rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer in 1969, the Freedom Farms were cooperatively owned and managed acres of land in which Black residents of Sunflower County, Mississippi could grow food, tend to livestock, and create permanent housing.²⁹¹ In addition to addressing food scarcity and land poverty of the Black community in rural Mississippi, Hamer designed the Freedom Farms to be “a safe space free from racial violence,” particularly the racialized sexual violence which afflicted poor Black women.²⁹² In the mid-1970s, queer women of the Pacific Northwest organized themselves to create and maintain The Oregon Women’s Land Trust, which provided safe spaces to live, camp, and retreat to for women and mothers. Like the Mississippi Freedom Farms, the Oregon Women’s Land Trust provided access to land for those who had been locked out of land ownership—in this case women, but particularly “third world

²⁹⁰ “Mission”, Oakland Community Land Trust, accessed January 13, 2021.

<https://oakclt.org/about/missionvalues/>

²⁹¹ Priscilla McCutcheon, “Fannie Lou Hamer’s Freedom Farms and Black Agrarian Geographies,” *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 51, no. 1 (2019), 207-208.

²⁹² Hamer was acutely aware of the sexual violence Black women faced in the U.S., having grown up in the South and witnessing many racially motivated instances of sexual violence against her community members. Hamer was also the victim of sexualized medical violence. In 1961, a white doctor completed a hysterectomy on Hamer without her consent, under the guise of removing a uterine tumor. As I discussed in chapter 2, sterilization of Black women was a common, state-sponsored occurrence in the U.S., particularly in the South. Though the practice had been going on for decades, the issue erupted in public discourse when two sisters, Minnie Lee Relf and Mary Alice Relf were involuntarily sterilized in a Montgomery Alabama clinic in 1973. The sisters were 12 and 14 years old.

and working class women.”²⁹³ Though they cannot be recounted here in full, these histories gesture towards a *longue durée* of women-led revisioning of land-use to more equitably include all people. Today, the centrality of the Mom’s House in the Oakland CLT, and the presence of other women-led CLTs—among them the Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, led by indigenous women in the ancestral homeland of Chochenyo-speaking Lisjan Ohlone people—represent an extension of this legacy.²⁹⁴

Moms for Housing’s architectural and land-use projects have evolved alongside their political movement, which now includes allies across the country. For M4H, their reparative political project is inseparable from these reparative building and land banking projects. From the paradoxical space of their home, a space marked by a legacy of racial/gendered oppression, yet imbued with the possibility of new horizons for housing justice, feminist liberation, and Black liberation, the Moms can both account for the racial/gendered logic of real estate speculation, and insist on a future in which housing is reconceived as a human right. To paraphrase McKittrick, 2928 Magnolia Street is a space where the Moms can articulate their emancipatory desires, without losing sight of the dehumanizing forces of real estate speculation.

Mothering as Space-Praxis

In making arguments about the spatial dimensions of Black mothers’ activism, this chapter is indebted to the work of Black feminist thinkers including, but not limited to, Patricia Hill Collins, Katherine McKittrick, and bell hooks. One of the themes that has

²⁹³ Tee A. Corinne, “The Oregon Women’s Land Trust and OWL Farm: A Booklet in Transition,” August 2, 2004.

²⁹⁴ This unceded territory is now referred to by settlers as the East Bay in Northern California.

emerged out of both their thinking and the archive of Black feminist activism explored in this chapter—which spans from the 1960s to present day, but surely has a much longer historical arch than can be attended to here—is Black mothers’ ability to create, maintain, and repair socio-spatial networks. I use the term ‘socio-spatial’ here to indicate that these networks are both social/kinship networks, and spatial ones comprised of many material locations and touchpoints.

When Patricia Hill Collins speaks of “women-centered networks” of mothers in *Black Feminist Thought*, she conceives of the term ‘mother’ as applying to a broad range of women assuming the role of caretaker, whether of the community at large or an individual. A child, for example, may be cared for by her biological mother, but she might also be reared by “othermothers”: extended family members, friends, and community members who are held together in a social system that privileges mutuality above privacy, codependence over independence. Collins describes Black mothers’ weblike infrastructure of care this way:

Community othermothers' participation in activist mothering demonstrates a clear rejection of separateness and individual interest as the basis of either community organization or individual self-actualization. Instead, the connectedness with others and common interest expressed by community othermothers model a very different value system, one whereby ethics of caring and personal accountability move communities forward.²⁹⁵

Similarly, writer Mai’a Williams describes mothering as the political work “of affirming life,” a practice that is central to the creation of anti-racist, feminist movements.²⁹⁶ Crucially Williams, like Collins, defines mothering expansively rather than allowing it to only narrowly describe the biological relation between woman and

²⁹⁵ Collins (2000), 192.

²⁹⁶ Mai’a Williams, *This is How We Survive: Revolutionary Mothering, War, and Exile in the 21st Century* (Oakland: PM Press, 2019), 10.

child. “Mothering,” Williams states, “isn’t gendered. Everyone, including and especially men, must engage in this mothering work.”²⁹⁷

Collins’ formulation of othermothering as a mode of activist practice is incredibly pertinent when thinking about why members of MASK and Moms for Housing have been quicker to publicly claim their position as mothers than as activists. At a 2018 Racial Justice Summit, Manasseh went so far as to state outright: “I am not an activist, I am not a community organizer, I am somebody’s mother.”²⁹⁸ Though members of Moms for Housing have been less shy of the terms activist(s) or activism, their way of speaking about themselves, and their political practice persistently foregrounds their positions as mothers. On the homepage of their website, Moms for Housing members describe themselves in the following manner: “We are mothers, we are workers, we are human beings, we deserve housing.” Noticeably missing from this list is the claim: ‘we are activists.’²⁹⁹

These statements might be surprising to the reader, but if one reads them alongside Collins’ and Williams’ definitions of mothering, it becomes clear that M4H and MASK women’s claiming of their position as ‘mothers’ or ‘moms’ is already a political act in and of itself. Activism can no longer be understood as something separate from motherhood, or something which needs to be claimed, but rather as something inherent to the praxis of mothering. Mothering, for the members of M4H and MASK, is already an activist practice. It makes community survival possible. This redefinition of

²⁹⁷ Williams (2019), 7.

²⁹⁸ Syd Stone, “Tamar Manasseh talks building community combating violence,” *The Daily Northwestern*, April 12, 2018. Accessed online. <https://dailynorthwestern.com/2018/04/13/city/tamar-manasseh-talks-building-community-combating-violence/>.

²⁹⁹ Moms for Housing Website, <https://moms4housing.org/aboutm4h>.

mothering as a community-driven, political practice is a critical intervention not only because it is a mode of recognizing the ongoing work of Black mothers in anti-racist, feminist movements, but it also forms a counter-narrative to the kind of mainstream, racist discourse about Black mothers encapsulated in Moynihan's 1965 report on the deterioration of the Black family. In direct contract to Moynihan's implication that single mothers have been responsible for the "breakdown of the negro family" and "a startling increase in welfare dependency," the mothers of M4H and MASK are creating self-determined political economies that exist without, or with minimal reliance on, the support of the State. More so than any other collectives discussed in this thesis, save for perhaps the Fifth Street Women's Building and the STAR House, M4H and MASK have created radically independent mutual aid infrastructures that answer to the needs of their communities, rather than to the strictures imposed by state-sponsored welfare.

The spaces described in this chapter—the block party, the MASK resource center, Mom's House—are critical components of MASK's & M4H's 'women-centered networks' because they provide a location for community to convene, for organizing to happen. They are nodal points through which social services flow and community needs are met. They are sometimes spaces of retreat from the outside world, but they are never isolationist in disposition. Instead, they are always oriented towards common use and collective interest, towards commoning and processes of collectivization. This chapter has described the difficult, but potentially liberatory work of designing, maintaining, and repairing these spaces. Indeed, the kind of spatial imagination nourished in these women-led/women-centered movements seems all the more critical as we consider how to build an intersectional feminist world.

Conclusion

Feminist Failure?

From the perspective of feminism, failure has often been a better bet than success. Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures.

Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*

... failure to function within the confines of a society that fails us is a pointed and necessary refusal.

Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism*

One of the questions that has haunted this thesis is that of failure. What are we to make of feminist spaces that are, in most cases, no longer standing? How do we grapple with feminist projects' uncanny ability to flame out—whether by screeching halt or prolonged decay? Should we mourn their demise, attempt to resuscitate them, or invest in sturdier models for the future? Is architecture's stubborn materiality, its impulse to crack, crumble, and mold, to blame for the short lifecycle of feminist spaces? Or is it the greed of real estate that makes it impossible for women to hold onto their movement clearing houses, despite the labor they've put into repairing and maintaining those places? Or perhaps more sinisterly, from the perspective of contemporary feminism, is it internal

fracturing along political, socioeconomic, or racial lines that thwarts a feminist movement's forward thrust?

If we take failure to mean the inability of a project or a space to achieve longevity, permanence, or national prominence, then failure is everywhere in the preceding pages. The squatters of the Fifth Street Women's Building were evicted, and their community center leveled to make way for police parking. Elsewhere in Manhattan, the Women's Liberation Center and STAR House met their demise as soon as they were unable to make rent. Though longer lived, the number of women spending time at the Los Angeles Woman's Building dwindled in its last years, resulting in its eventual closure. Of the five women's buildings, only the Cambridge Women's Building survives today, though not in its original space on Memorial Drive. Similarly, the second chapter of this thesis, "Self-Help as Space-Praxis: The (Un) Making of Clinical Space at the Feminist Women's Health Centers," chronicles the slow demise of Feminist Women's Health Centers subjected to the violence of anti-abortion activists. Many clinics went up in flames, but others closed as a result of clinic staff members' sheer exhaustion. Warding off protesters, protecting patients, cleaning building walls spray painted with anti-abortion sentiments, and sorting through medical files singed in an arson attack were, of course, never part of the job description. Only three Feminist Women's Health Centers still operate today: the Atlanta Feminist Women's Health Center, and the California clinics in Chico, Redding, and Grass Valley that exist under the new, less political moniker "Women's Health Specialists of California."³⁰⁰

³⁰⁰ For more information on the Atlanta Feminist Women's Health Center visit <https://www.feministcenter.org/>; For more on the Women's Health Specialists of California visit <https://www.womenshealthspecialists.org/>.

Contemporary feminist spaces certainly appear sturdier. Moms for Housing has successfully placed their home under the management of the Oakland Community Land Trust, an incorporated 501(3)(c) that is now twelve years old. And while MASK's Resource Center is housed in a series of movable shipping containers, the organization itself has reached a level of public recognition that might indicate its longevity. Yet even this is a difficult claim to make with any assurance. MASK is less well-known and organizes less people than the Black Panther Party, for example, did in the 1960s and 1970s, and the Black Panther Party only lasted for sixteen years. Compared to the durability and longevity of the U.S. State, and many private institutions, universities, and nonprofits, the feminist initiatives explored herein are relatively ephemeral and fleeting.

My immediate impulse in writing this conclusion was to argue against the notion that these feminist projects were failures; in fact, the original title of this chapter was "Against Failure." There would've been several ways to marshal pieces of evidence towards this argument, among them the supposed 'successes' of contemporary feminism as marked, in small part, by the recent emphasis on care, repair, and maintenance in architectural discourse. The friction I have come up against, in working through this line of thinking, is the inability of conventional definitions of success and failure to attend to the complexity of the feminist projects and spaces described here within. These static models of success and failure, queer theorist Jack Halberstam has argued, go "hand in hand with capitalism," wherein the winners are those with a heteronormative family, a sizable income, a home in suburbia, a downtown office, and an SUV, and the losers are the renters, public transportation-takers, queer folks, as well as singles and single mothers

living paycheck to paycheck.³⁰¹ Mainstream definitions of failure tend to describe it as a waystation on the road to success—hence the adage ‘if at first you fail, try again.’ Losers are inevitable in the capitalist system, but they are told to maintain optimism and hope for future success, to improve themselves and try, again, to achieve a narrowly defined ‘good life.’

But what if a feminist construction of failure represents something entirely different than this static definition of failure, which requires the persistence of a circumscribed category of losers, and is so attached to a cruel sense of optimism?³⁰² What if feminist failure was more closely aligned to feminist practices of refusal—refusal of normative modes of life, masculinist expectations, and the burden of maintaining and repairing oppressive spaces and systems? In his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam describes queer and feminist failure as

... a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities.³⁰³

To unpack this explanation of failure, a return to the final days of the Fifth Street Women’s Building will prove useful. In the ninth hour of the feminists’ occupation of 330 E. 5th Street, as police threats of eviction were sounding less and less hollow, the city of New York offered them a different path forward: they could remain in the

³⁰¹ J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 88.

³⁰² Lauren Berlant describes cruel optimism as the “condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object,” or a relation in which “something you desire is actually the obstacle to your flourishing.” See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

³⁰³ Halberstam, 88.

building if they participated in restoring it to its former status as an emergency welfare center. The feminists responded to this proposal with a resounding refusal to participate in the welfare system. Reflecting on the decision, Reeni Goldin, one of the organizers of the Fifth Street Women's Building, drew on an archive of personal memories:

I had a friend who worked for the welfare department and she had to go into these women's houses and count their socks and see how many shirts and underwear they had, and if they had too many they were docked. It was really intrusive, invasive. And that's what they would have wanted us to do. And we were like, 'We're not counting anybody's socks, are you kidding me? We're not gonna be their jailer.'³⁰⁴

Goldin's memory captures the way in which governmental approaches to care stood in diametric opposition to the practices of mutual aid that the Fifth Street Women's Building had been founded to support—including the communitarian exchange of food, clothing, shelter, education, and childcare. Whereas the welfare model exhibited a scarcity mindset, mandating the rationing of material needs, the organizers of the Fifth Street Women's Building had adopted a more generous approach to defining and providing for such needs. This method was built on an understanding that, as feminist theorist Rosemary Hennessey has articulated, meeting “corporeal needs always takes place through social relationships,” and that this “social interaction itself translates into a vital need.”³⁰⁵ While a feminist space could be designed to support the affective relationships necessary to furnish corporeal and social needs, the sterile environment of a welfare center, the Fifth Street squatters understood, would be stripped of that capacity.

³⁰⁴ Reeni Goldin quoted in Adrian Shirk, “This Building is Yours,” *Catapult Magazine* online, September 25, 2015.

³⁰⁵ Rosemary Hennessey, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York; London: Routledge, 2000), 210.

Failure, in the case of the Fifth Street Women's Building, signified a powerful refusal to abandon feminist, mutual care practices in favor of state-sponsored charity. Read through this act of dissent, feminist failure could be misinterpreted as negative or unoptimistic in its disposition, but I would like to suggest that it should, instead, be understood as a hopeful act. Goldin and her co-conspirators' decision to relinquish the Fifth Street Women's Building at a moment when they recognized that they could no longer maintain it in a way that served their political goals was, to quote Halberstam, a resolution founded in the future-oriented belief that "alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent."³⁰⁶

This trust in alternatives, in the possibility of finding new spaces to claim in the margins, proved fruitful for many individuals and collectives discussed in this thesis. Though the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) House was short lived, for instance, it found new life two decades later in the Transy House in Brooklyn's Park Slope neighborhood. In 1994, trans* partners Chelsea Goodwin, founder of Queer Nation, and Rusty Mae Moore, Professor Emerita of Comparative Literature, bought and fixed up a "trashed up home" at 214 16th Street for \$150,000.³⁰⁷ It was not long before Moore and Goodwin began inviting trans* individuals facing housing insecurity into their home. For the following thirteen years, Moore and Goodwin transformed 214 16th St into Transy House, a "communal living experiment"³⁰⁸ that took explicit inspiration from the STAR House.³⁰⁹ Transy House served a crucial function in a city where trans*

³⁰⁶ Halberstam, 88.

³⁰⁷ Chelsea Goodwin and Dr. Rusty Mae Moore, interviewed by Nadia Awad, New York City Trans Oral History Project, May 4, 2017.

³⁰⁸ Chelsea Goodwin quoted in *Changing House*, Directed by Z.A. Martohardjono. Frameline, 2009. <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/changing-house>.

³⁰⁹ In an interview with Deborah Rudacille, Rusty M. Moore notes that Chelsea was

individuals' options for shelter were exceedingly limited, as many of those individuals were neither welcome in their families' homes, nor were they afforded entrance to women's and men's shelters on the basis of their biological sex or gender expression.

Among the many trans* people who came in and out of Transy House was STAR co-founder and former STAR House resident Sylvia Rivera, who resided in Moore and Goodwin's home from 1997 until her death in 2002. Much in the same way that she assumed the role of mother and matriarch at the STAR house, she took on the nickname Ma Sylvia at Transy House. It was a space where Rivera participated in the project of communal living and mutual care, but it was also one where she received care, particularly as she battled severe alcoholism at the end of her life. Though Transy House closed three years after Rivera's death, its legacy lives on through other trans* housing projects in New York, among them the Princess Janae Place, a collective that helps trans* individuals' transition from homelessness to more permanent living arrangements.³¹⁰ The persistence of gender-affirmative spaces, even when they are forced to forgo a specific building or unit and start again, is indicative of how feminist failure can serve as an adaptable survival practice.

It is critical at this point to name the kinds of failure that feminist failure does not support: the failure of inclusion—i.e. the exclusion of trans* women, queer women, and women of color from feminist movements—as well as the failure to design anti-racist,

“one of the last daughters of Sylvia Rivera,” implying that she lived in or spent time in the STAR House in the early 1970s. Moore recalls Goodwin telling her about the STAR House, and claims that it was “sort of filed away in the back of my (Moore's) mind” when she started Transy House. See Deborah Rudacille, *The Riddle of Gender: Science, Activism, and Transgender Rights* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005), 147.

³¹⁰ For more on the Princess Janae Place, see: <https://princessjanaeplace.org/>. London: Duke University Press, 2011).

anti-homophobic, and anti-transphobic feminist movements and spaces. These failures, which are observable at several moments in this thesis, uphold the normative social stratification of the world, rather than counter it. In direct contrast, the kind of feminist failure I am arguing for here is the failure to uphold, endorse, or comply with the normative. It represents a willingness to let go of spaces when the conditions of holding on to them have become too extractive, and an intersectional feminist project is no longer viable therewithin. Feminist failure is marked by loss, grief, and sadness, but it always maintains a level of hopefulness and optimism about the possibility of new collectivities and new spaces that might even better respond to women's needs and desires.

This thesis has attempted to bring together a “heteroglossia” of feminist, queer, and trans* movements and places. Originally theorized by Donna Haraway, and later expanded upon by architectural theorist H  l  ne Frichot, the term heteroglossia refers to an opus that “allows diverse or ‘different’ (hetero) definitions of concepts to sit alongside, and brush up against, one another.”³¹¹ Space-praxis, the term this thesis orbits around, has been differently defined in each chapter. It spans from a practice of building commons, to redistributing the labor of social reproduction, to adopting self-help as both theory and design methodology, to organizing mutual aid, to repairing broken systems and spaces. The space-practitioners examined in this thesis also vary greatly—from working class white women, to socialist women, to Black women, to queer and trans* women, to middle-class mothers, to housing insecure mothers—and each of their

³¹¹ H  l  ne Frichot, *How to Make Yourself a Feminist Design Power Tool* (Baunach: Spurbuchverlag, 2016), 113.

“situated and embodied knowledges” have greatly shaped (and continue to shape) the projects they were/are invested in.³¹²

Yet, despite all of these projects’ distinctiveness and occasional chafing against one another, there are also through lines to be traced between the movements and spaces explored in the preceding pages. Politically, the women of these varying initiatives are united in their refusal of the individualization of social reproduction, with each designing alternative systems to support the sharing of reproductive labor—from childcare, to cleaning, to cooking, to healthcare and beyond. Individuals involved in women’s buildings developed protocols for sharing the labor of maintenance work; feminist clinicians in the Feminist Women’s Health Centers taught health practices like pelvic self-examinations to newcomers so that all could participate in providing women with quality healthcare; members of MASK created block parties in which neighbors shared in the work of creating a safe space to eat, play, and relax; and the women of Moms for Housing fought for a home that is now being redesigned as a shared living space for mothers and children. At the core of each of these political projects are imperatives to share in the difficult work of survival, to nurture social relations, and create space for joyful celebration.

Above all, these projects are united in their dispositions towards space. First, the environments uncovered herein resist strict, programmatic classification. They disturb the public-private binary that has been so baked into space, and is both the result and instigator of gendered divisions in buildings and cities. The Feminist Women’s Health Clinics, for one, blurred the line between clinical space, domestic space, and space for

³¹² Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988), 583.

political organizing. In the same rooms that pelvic examinations and abortions occurred, so too did dinner parties, community meetings, and education sessions. Similarly, women's centers troubled distinctions between residential, educational, and political spaces; Mom's House has become a site of community organizing against real estate speculation in Oakland as well as a permanent residence for homeless and marginally housed mothers; and the MASK Resource Centers now function as schools, community organizing centers, and recreational spaces. Through resistance to the impulse to strictly classify, sort, and order space, the women explored in this thesis have shaped generative, multi-faceted spaces and space-praxes.

The space-praxes explored in this thesis have also, with varying degrees of militancy and formality, refused private ownership models in favor of collective modes of imagining and constructing claims to space. Put otherwise, the women explored in this thesis often purposefully failed at making spaces that could be legible, sustainable, or profitable under capitalist terms. In the informal sense, women involved in building community centers, clinics, and alternative institutions at the beginning of the 1970s developed a feeling of belonging in these spaces through the investment of their own time and labor into them. Feminists interacted with their claimed spaces in ways that ranged from completing maintenance work to engaging in the affective labor of caring for other individuals involved in the project. While many of these spaces, like the STAR House, the Woman's Building, and the Feminist Women's Health Centers among others, were beholden to capitalist real estate practices that required them to source monthly rent, they dramatically restructured their own, internal political economies towards socialized ends. In other moments, activists of the preceding pages reconstructed building ownership on a

broader, financial level. When the Mom’s House was purchased by the Oakland Community Land Trust, for instance, it became part of a community-managed fiscal infrastructure that is designed to counteract gentrification and ensure long term real estate affordability. Though these approaches to socializing building ownership range in their techniques, they all provide a powerful critique of private ownership models, and suggest alternative methods for collectively maintaining and inhabiting the built environment.

As corporate visions of feminism gain purchase in the 21st century, making the board room the new, definitive space of liberal feminist politics, it is all the more critical that we re-examine anti-capitalist feminist experiments in building equitable, urban commons.³¹³ In this thesis, I have been interested in attending to feminist spaces “located in the margins” of American culture, spaces that feminist theorist bell hooks once called sites of refusal.³¹⁴ Hooks describes spaces on the margin as being radically open—open to the possibility of sheltering “a community of resistance,” to the opportunities embedded in feminist failures, to the prospect of living together otherwise.³¹⁵ Space-praxis is incubated in these buildings on the margins, and it’s language is one of feminist failure: the failure to reproduce heterosexist spatial scripts, the failure to accept the

³¹³ Corporate feminism has history that stretches back to the 1970s, but it has gained new purchase with the rise of women-only co-working spaces like The Wing. Founded in 2017 by businesswomen Audrey Gelman and Lauren Kassan, The Wing opened its first location in the Soho neighborhood of Manhattan and quickly expanded to other locations in New York City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington DC, and London. In its architectural aesthetics (the Wing locations are designed by all-women teams of designers) and its communications, the Wing brands itself as an inclusive, mutually-supportive community of women who pay around \$3000/year to access the space. Starting in 2019, however, reporters brought to light hundreds of complaints from workers (largely women of color) and members alike who criticized the Wing for its class, sexuality, and race-based internal hierarchies. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, the Wing has temporarily closed all of its co-working spaces.

³¹⁴ hooks (1989), 21.

³¹⁵ hooks, 19.

existing order of the built environment, and the will to imagine, design, maintain, and repair architecture that can support a more just and equitable world.

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Appendix

Conversation with Sheila Levrant de Bretteville (SLDB), interviewed by MC Overholt (MC) and Kathryn-Kay Johnson (KJ) conducted on April 7, 2021.

MCO: Tell me about the first Woman's Building location on 743 South Grandview Avenue.

SLDB: It was (formerly) called the Chouinard. They had a very famous guy teaching sculpture; it was much more physical and all men. But I didn't know that at the time, I knew it as a school because my friend Marianne and I were doing research for this book on CalArts, and CalArts was planned to be inside of that building. I mean, it was bought out by CalArts. That's how I learned about it. So I was hired to do all the graphics for the school, and I did it actually. It was great for me because they (CalArts) were so busy hiring faculty and planning the school they let me do anything I wanted. One of the things I made was a poster, the one that says "taste and style just aren't enough."

Sisterhood Bookstore (one of the members of the building) sold Everywoman newspaper, which I designed. So they were one of the members in of the first building. There was also another Latina woman who ran a travel agency and there was a shrink who was there. There were about ten different organizations that were in there, and I ended up being the president because of my pulling the longest straw. We had to rent the building as an organization not as an individual. So I had signed for it. We painted the entry. The building was like a box, and to get into it you had to go in a hallway to the to the courtyard. This was a really terrific building, physically and in every way, but we were only there for a year.

But we did have the Women in Design Conference. I planned a week of different conferences, so there was a conference in music, a conference in video, a conference in writing, and one in graphic design and architecture. We had panels, we also had someone come and do a belly dance. It was really anything anyone suggested. But there were some serious disagreements around it. which had very much to do with space, because there were many architects there. We had a panel, and each of the architects showed their work and talked about it. And they were very different, so they ended up arguing, which is fine.

I taught classes at the Woman's Building, and that's where I developed all the classes I teach now, which is really crazy. What I was interested in was women feeling comfortable anywhere they went. So I did a class in which women had to choose a place where they were uncomfortable, then design a poster that they could post in that place and negotiate with the person who owned the place. Different people did it in different places. One woman did it an espresso bar downtown about the 'right kind of attention.' She did it because she felt that the men paid too much attention to her and she didn't want that kind of attention. We had another very tall woman who really felt awkward when passing a store that sold clothes. You know, wedding gifts, wedding dresses and things of that sort. And she made a poster about that. And then there were a couple of African

American women who were in the workshop. One made a poster about racial separation in Pasadena, while the other made a poster about hair... Everyone did it about something that was problematic to them, and that was related to space.

In fact, the first talk I gave ever on a stage, where I was sure I was going to die, was about public and private space. The whole notion of a public zone and a private zone, and how that was established and represented in magazines. People have been writing about this for a long time—public and private spaces have been very gendered.

MCO: Yeah. I'm thinking about this division of public and private, and the feminist attitude about disturbing those boundaries, and wondering if that mindset was prescient at the moment you found the Chouinard building, went in, and redid it? My understanding is that building needed renovations.

SLDB: I wanted to do the least possible work, because we had to physically do it ourselves. So on the first floor, Sisterhood Bookstore was supposed to come, and so I wanted to make a kind of opening so you could see into the bookstore but you couldn't touch the books. But when Sisterhood didn't come, that became the entryway to the space. The graphic design area was in the back, where it was easier to have all of those big printing presses. There was a kind of separation (it wasn't something I did, just something that naturally happened) between the women on the west side of the building who were doing carpentry, and the women on the east side who were cultural people—artists, performance artists, graphic designers, and everyone else. But the women from the west-side came and helped to build the dark room.

MCO: Was all of this happening at the first location or the second location of the Woman's Building?

SLDB: I'm describing the second location. It's the only one we had to do anything physical for. All we had to do at the first one is paint the walls, and people took over their spaces doing the things that they did.

We also had meetings that were actually really hard on me. It's a little bit like meetings at Yale, when you get people who are very different, who have different points of view, and they are simply not going to agree easily. And you have to just accommodate the differences because they're not going to become different all of a sudden. And so I learned a lot about that all at once... There were just so many disagreements about so many things, which was hard. Also, money-wise, we had to pay the rent. We had to pay \$3,000 rent, so we had to come up with \$3,000 every month. I was constantly having to ask people for money, which is something I don't like to do and I'm not good at. But out of desperation, I ended up asking people for money. So for me that was really hard.

KJ: There was something you said a little while back about the buildings, and wanting to keep them as open as possible. I was wondering if you could expand on that. Is that related to this question of public/private? Like the idea of inviting as many people or as many different kind of women as possible into the space.

SLDB: So the classes we had were all-women classes, because some women wouldn't have said or done the things they needed to do if there had been any guys around.

KJ: Right.

SLDB: 'Feeling to Form,' which was a class I taught with my friend, was one thing that really opened women up. And I didn't want to be responsible for closing them down. I didn't know the psychological things that I was doing. So I had a process where you brought something from home that you like a lot, and then you write down the qualities of it. Just single words, a bunch of different words... Then after the women did that, they had to go back and say 'I am (insert adjective used to describe object).' And it usually brought up a lot of personal feelings. My friend (co-teacher) then had them all lie on the floor and get relaxed... then we had pastels and paper to people could draw. They could draw anything they wanted on it. And then if they wanted, I would tell them the formal aspects of the thing they had drawn, so they could see the ways in which it was special and something of themselves. So it was a process of getting people to make things from the deepest parts of who they are. Students came every time we did it, and it worked!

MCO: It strikes me that a lot of women's spaces in the 1970s found themselves somewhere on a spectrum, with one end representing absolute separatism, for example communes and back to the land movements, and on the other end, community service-focused spaces like battered women's shelters and clinics which were positioning themselves in a very public, outward-facing way. Where do you think the Woman's Building fell on that spectrum? Did that position change over time?

SLDB: Well it definitely changed after I left, because there were no longer people who were guiding it. And so there were guys renting spaces. So in the effort to pay for the building, it became something that was more male and female. But I think it's a little like the difference between graphic design and the School of Architecture. I've even had someone at Yale ask me: "Why do you want to be part of the Art School and not the Architecture School?" I said: "If I was in the Architecture School, the students there would all be serving the architects. So it's much safer for us to be here, where we can have our own equality. On the other hand, Graphic Design's origin is based on the printing of the Bible. I'm a nice Jewish girl talking about the Bible here (laughs), but it could be the Old Testament or the New Testament. Whichever it is, it was being printed so the monks had access to it, so everybody had access to it. And that was the whole reason that things were printed. So there is a way in which, the very nature of graphic design is has a public character. It just does... Everything about graphic design offers people an opportunity to do something that means something to them, or engages with other people. And actually, our program here at Yale tries to make it possible to do both. Either-or, or together.

MCO: One of the things I want to ask you about is the link that was made between the L.A. Woman's Building and Sophia Hayden's Woman's Building made for the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

SLDB: That's a huge problem. Here's the story on that. When I met Hazel Carby, who is a friend of mine here, I found out that the treatment of people of color at the Woman's Building was disgusting. It was the usual bad stuff. And they (colleagues) never told me. I figured they knew all about it, they are art historians. The book (on Hayden) doesn't show you that. So, I learned here that Black women were not treated well at all, and there were none of them on the boards or anything. No women of any color. It was really a white supremacist organization. I was horrified. Absolutely horrified. So I start every lecture... with Hazel's quote about the Woman's Building (in Chicago), because it's really important to establish from the very get-go, that women are not all the same. And here are some of the differences that haven't been paid attention to, that I didn't pay attention to, because I figured my colleagues knew everything about it.

KJ: Along this line of thinking, MC, I know you have one more question about failure and also the legacy of the Woman's Building.

MCO: Yes, this question is kind of a theoretical one. So bear with me. In writing the conclusion for this thesis, I've felt compelled to respond to a few people who have asked me, well, 'what do you make of these places that have failed, or ended.' I've been really grappling with that, because I've never seen any of the projects I've talked about in my thesis as 'failures.' I finally came across this book by Jack Halberstam. Do you know him?

SLDB: I recognize his name. What's the book?

MCO: It's called *The Queer Art of Failure*. And there is a quote in it that resonated with me. He says: "From the perspective of feminism, failure has often been a better bet than success. Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures." I'm wondering if this quote resonates with you, and with the story of the Los Angeles Woman's Building?

SLDB: I don't see it as failure either. Things that end often end because it's time for them to end. I don't like the last part of that sentence. Who is deciding what womanhood is?

MCO: Yeah.

SLDB: I think each woman decides it for herself, finally. Or comes to recognize it in herself. Or never uses the word even!

For me, here at Yale, it was very clear from the minute I was here, that I didn't want to do anything except work out the changes in this program. Because, a bureaucracy can't be womanized. It's a contradiction in terms, as far as I'm concerned. And the things that I enjoy about those aspects of being a woman have to do with a kind

of engagement with others who are not exactly like you. In a way, it's how you find out who you are. (Laughs) It's very helpful!

I didn't design being a public artist, it was more that I saw an opportunity to make fewer things really well, and make them last a little bit longer-lasting than books. And less privatized. So, I think things change over time. I mean the program (at Yale) has changed over time. It's in the process of changing. I think we have more people of color and of different ethnicities—not only ethnicities but also, we've always been the most international program. That came with the territory, for whatever reason. But I think there are more people from more kinds of different backgrounds. That could make for more problems, but I don't think so. I think it's going to make the program richer. And I think it's really of interest.

It's hard in a hierarchy, which this (Yale) is, to not be hierarchical. You know, I didn't want to have a named (endowed faculty position) at Yale, but when they gave me Caroline Street I said, ok, my work is in the street, so I'll take that one. (Laughs) Being a street professor... I think that's great (laughs again). I think that's totally appropriate.

KJ: I will say, I am very excited about the term 'street professor' (laughs).

MCO: I think that's something I will aspire to also!

KJ & MCO: Thank you so much for talking with us, Sheila.