Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The London Journal

A Review of Metropolitan Society Past and Present

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/yldn20

How We Live Now: Reimagining Spaces with Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative

Level G, The Barbican Centre. Free. Until 23 December 2021

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To cite this article: Christine Hannigan (2021): How We Live Now: Reimagining Spaces with Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative, The London Journal, DOI: 10.1080/03058034.2021.1992828

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03058034.2021.1992828

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Published online: 16 Nov 2021.

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THE LONDON JOURNAL, 2021, 1–5

EXHIBITION REVIEW

How We Live Now: Reimagining Spaces with Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative. Level G, The Barbican Centre. Free. Until 23 December 2021.

'How We Live Now: Reimagining Spaces with Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative' is the latest exhibition of the Barbican's Level G Programme, 'an experimental platform for projects that ask crucial social and cultural questions'. The question asked here is who creates the built environment, and for whom; the answer is provided through a focus on the work of Matrix, a pioneering architectural co-operative founded in 1981. In their 13 years of operation, the group worked solely on state-funded, social building projects, typically with women and children's groups as clientele.

Feminist design collective Edit created the physical structures of the exhibit to reflect Matrix's concern with the informal use of space. Architectural drawings and photographs chronicling Matrix's work are fastened to plywood frames, alluding to a construction site. Curtains made by Cawley Studio hang from a metal rail snaking through the exhibit to subdivide the space (Figure 1). Parting them to enter, the viewer is transported back to 1980s England. Panels display adverts for cars and household consumables with copy and images demeaning women, bizarrely irrelevant to the product advertised. Heather Powell's film *Paradise Circus* (1988) plays on a large television, cataloguing the hostility of Birmingham's built environment: its thoughtlessly designed housing, unsafe and creepy tunnel network, and labyrinthine road layout that prioritised motorists and polluted the air. The film examines the government's decades of post-war slum clearances and replacement Garden City neighbourhoods. These suburban prototypes were planned and designed by men who failed to properly consider the needs of anyone unlike them. The house was not viewed as a place of work, and accommodation for people moving through the city with disabilities, or children, or without cars, was nearly non-existent.

This scene-setting brings Matrix's radical approach, and the wave of feminism of which it was a part, into full relief. Juxtaposed to these lazy, sexist banalities is Matrix's manifesto, a single sheet of unadorned paper which sets out:

- a non-hierarchical, mutually supportive organisation
- developing new relationships between cilent, architect, and builder
- questioning and exploring different design and living possibilities
- more intuitive decisions in design and organisation

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DOI 10.1080/03058034.2021.1992828

FIGURE 1 A plywood panel displays Matrix print media from the 1980s. Image by the author.

The exhibit's seating was designed by Material Habit, a Chilterns-based research project by Guan Lee and Rachel Jones, the latter of whom dyed its textiles alongside Ciara Callaghan with extracts of plants like ivy, birch, and willow from the Barbican's surrounding area. I chatted with Jos Boys, co-founder of Matrix and also its book group, who co-curated the exhibit alongside Jon Astbury. She outlines how the manifesto was enacted and reflects on some of its complexities. Each project had two architects who shared the workload and supported each other. Everyone, regardless of their role or experience, was paid the same, and

FIGURE 2 Models similar to the ones Matrix used with clients in the centre of the exhibit. Image by the author.

attended weekly staff meetings where decisions were made and projects shared, with some consciousness raising thrown in (which, Boys noted, could make discussions exhausting). Matrix's collectivism was another way of reframing architecture. Drawings weren't signed by the individual who drew them, a practice Boys noted has become more commonplace. Designers collaborated with clients, using tools and parlance that didn't require an architecture degree to understand. Rather than prescribe their own vision, the team first listened to what the people who would be using the space needed and wanted.

These tenets were operationalised in a variety of women's projects, like the Dalston Children's Centre and the Jumoke Nursey in Southwark whose clients, a childcare group, sought a non-racist, non-sexist, non-hierarchical space. The resulting nursery was delineated by purpose, not age groups. The kitchen was not hidden in the rear of the space but placed in the centre of the building, and play spaces were carved out of mezzanines scaled to children's heights.

A major project highlighted in the exhibit shows a fuller application of these principles. Matrix worked with the Jagonari Women's Education Resource Centre between 1984 and 1987, helping them develop their ambitions from what were originally plans for some Portacabins. These local Asian women won funding from the Greater London Council (GLC) to create a space for multiple uses, from 'meetings and training courses to childcare and badminton'. The lead architects, Anne Thorne and Ann de Graft-Johnson, asked the clients to bring in photographs of buildings they liked, tested possibilities with demountable models (Figure 2), and sought their opinions on the façade in a 'brick picnic' – an outing where they toured other buildings to decide what type and colour bricks would suit their space. The centre complements its surroundings on Whitechapel Road but is distinct for its secular Asian aesthetics. Metal lattice work over windows doubled as both decoration and security — racists had already abused and attacked the clients.

Technocratic fields like architecture and planning often wrongly assume their value system, language, and processes are race- and gender-neutral. Boys describes the gruelling competitiveness of architecture school, and an insidious stereotype of the ideal student: confident, obsessive, individualistic, combatively defensive of his ideas, yet 'you often literally cannot perform that stereotype if you're female or if you're a person of colour'. Biographical details of the individual Matrix members and how they linked up are scant, but an article in the exhibit by one of its architects, Ann de Graft-Johnson, grants a glimpse into her experience. Her encounters with prejudiced professors and students continued into her career. She connects how office cultures and the built environment reinforce racism and sexism in the other, including how and when people move through them:

> During my first few months [at Matrix] my awareness of how the environment is created primarily by and for white men grew immeasurably. My journey to work through the City of London perhaps highlighted this most. By day this area is streaming with men in business suits, some white women and a miniscule number of black people. Late at night, or in the early hours, the people you see are women; they are black and they are going to and from cleaning the City's offices.

To change the processes creating these conditions, Matrix aligned itself with women working in related fields like urban planning and construction. The exhibit plays two films made in 2018, Winnie Herbstein's *Studwork*, which followed women learning building trades in Glasgow, and Ayo Akingbade's *Street 66*, about Ghanian housing activist Dora Boatehmah, who fought for the resident-led redevelopment of Brixton's Angell Town Estate, which had been neglected by Lambeth Council. This co-operative ethos extended across a wider network of allied groups, including the Association of Community Technical Aid Centres (ACTAC) Women's Design Service, Women's Education in Building, Women in Planning, and the Women into Architecture and Building (WIAB) access course at the Polytechnic of North London. Matrix's influential book *Making Space: Women and the Man-Made Environment* had a wide impact upon publication in 1984. Their other design guides, like *Building for Child Care: making better buildings for the Under-5s* and *A Job Designing Buildings*, highlighted how built environmental professionals could adopt feminist practices.

Matrix was one of many organisations dissatisfied with professional norms and thus creating new ways of working in the 1980s. Boys credits their relative successes in part to the funding available; the GLC would pay the costs of projects and in-depth feasibility

studies. At the time, London was more affordable and it was possible to live cheaply; squatting was common and not criminalised as it is today, so people could survive on low wages while getting their ideas off the ground. By 2010, however, the same year David Cameron's conservative government introduced 'austerity measures', the situation changed dramatically: Jagonari was priced out of the building it dreamed up in 1984, and by 2015, had folded entirely as an organisation. Historic England refused to list the building in 2018, which is now operated by a private commercial childcare provider.

Significantly, the exhibit doesn't end its focus when Matrix disbanded in 1994 but takes stock of its legacy in subsequent waves of feminism and anti-racism in organisations like taking place and Black Females in Architecture. I ask Boys what she thinks about the future of the field. She is hopeful groups like Section of Architectural Workers (SAW), a newly-formed union nested within United Voices of the World, will further reform exploitative working conditions in architectural practice, as the New Architecture Movement (NAM) did in the 1970s and 80s. She points to groups like The DisOrdinary Architecture Project (which she co-founded in 2008) for enabling alternative creative and critical starting points such as 'misfitting' led by disabled artists and other non-normative groups. She wants change to education and the profession to be process-driven and mindset-changing, not superficial patchwork attempts at 'increasing diversity'. Similarly, 'sustainability' must transcend carbon footprints alone to encompass social and equity elements. These often don't involve glamorous high-tech interventions; Boys gives the example of providing free toilets and seating in public spaces.

Before leaving the Barbican, I paid a visit to the toilets on the same floor. They were difficult to find. Three small stalls were arranged around a narrow, curved corridor. There were neither changing tables nor disabled access. As I heaved the swinging door open to exit, a mother with three small children was entering. We awkwardly danced around each other as she struggled to shepherd them in. Once outside the disorienting, Brutalist Barbican, on my bike ride home, I surveyed a few dozen of the hundreds of cranes slotted in buildings sites, erecting more glass towers. Who are they for?

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