FORMS, TRANSITIONS, AND DESIGN APPROACHES IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE: A “FEMALE” PERSPECTIVE

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1 ABSTRACT
Do female landscape architects design differently than their male counterparts? For many decades, this seemingly simple question has been often contemplated, but little answered. This issue remains an uneasy topic of conversation to people in our discipline. Although previous scholars have made contributions toward examining the questions of gender, culture and landscape, there has yet to be a definitive work that outlines and explores the potential gender issues that today’s landscape architecture professionals may encounter. Among those issues, an inquiry into women as creators of designed landscapes provides a general framework for the study: what are the forms, transitions and approaches that female designers use when building landscapes? Through the process of literature review, primary data collection and survey analysis, an understanding of how female designers consider their gender identity influence the design process emerges. Although findings suggest that gender may influence design process but not outcome, and designed landscapes without specific forms come from both male and female creators, it gives a novel perspective to landscape designers of any gender, and encourages them to consider how their innate female personality might potentially influence design thinking. This study may provide a good opportunity for researchers and students to challenge the gender stereotypes in our discipline.

1.1 Keywords
gender, female, landscape form, design approach, transition
2 INTRODUCTION

Perhaps we don’t need to overemphasize the importance of women’s contributions to landscape architecture today. In the United States, the numbers of women in landscape architecture has experienced a significant increase for decades. A recent report indicates that about half graduates of accredited landscape architecture programs are female in 2015, and 36% ASLA members are female in 2016 (WILA PPN). This number corresponds to the percentage of new licensed women architects in 2016 (NCARB 2017 Demographic). Historians may notice that there was only one female member of the total eleven founding members when ASLA was established in 1899. Although the growth of female members parallels the growth of male members, women represent less than 30 percent of ASLA fellows today.

In the early twentieth century, women were somehow considered naturally adapted to the profession (Way, 2009). Several renowned female pioneers in our field solidified the foundation for later development, and their professional performances in multiple scales ranged from residential garden design to community development and children's playgrounds. Today, women are becoming leaders in all types of landscape projects. How do they bring a unique insight to the transition of landscape architecture profession over time?

Previous discussions of gender issues in landscape have been broad: Some focused on historical narratives such as the lives of early female pioneers and their contribution to landscape gardening; others focused on cultural metaphors such as using the phrase "Mother Earth" to link gender and landscape. Still others focused on the people and environment; that is, women as creators or users of the built landscape. Discussions in gender and landscape, if not properly addressed, may result in the Mars vs. Venus thinking that sounds outdated today. Decades ago, Elizabeth Meyer reminded us we should be skeptical of gender affiliations to the landscape which are often considered as “female”: irregular, emotional, and even chaotic (Meyer, 1997). Besides, in his article " Gender, Landscape, Culture: Sorting out Some Questions", Robert Riley suggested the importance to classify gender issues in the landscape even before we start to talk about it (Riley, 1994). Among these issues, a female's perspective on landscape design provided a theoretical framework for this study: what are the forms, transitions and approaches that women may take during the design process? By reviewing the literature and asking for women professional’s advice, I attempt to explore the potential gender issues that landscape colleagues may encounter in the future.

To be more specific, the purpose of this study can be categorized into three topics: (1) to understand how women professionals think about their gender identity may influence design process. (2) to look into the idea of “Female Landscape Forms” in theory and practice. (3) to examine the historical transitions of women’s approach to landscape design since the early twentieth century to the present day.

3 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

3.1 Female’s Approach to Landscape Design

In this study, the concept of a female’s approach to landscape design may be considered an opposing one to males, which focused on how individuals remained distinct but shared the experience of being women. Karen Madsen and John Furlong, in their article “Women, Land, Design: Considering Connections,” have mentioned female’s approaches could be described as “women’s way of reasoning and relating, teaching and learning, designing.”

Women may think different than men in the policy making process. In her article “Gender, Moral, Voices, and the Making of Environmental Policy: A Case Study in Norway’s Ministry of Environment”, Kristine Hill suggested: “Male policy makers favored balancing competing rights in ethical reasoning, while women favored a strategy of response to the needs of affected parties, particularly children.” She further added: “Women are more likely to see emotion as an important component of an effective policy-making process, while men either did not address it or found it a negative influence.” (Hill, 1994) They might be more emotional because there is a biological basis for those differences between men and women. Turning to the design aspect, when being asked “what might feminist landscape look like?” Deborah Ryan answered, “There is a woman’s way of designing and that it is non-patriarchal, collaborative, temporarily. It is constructed of devalued or discarded materials, and it fosters connections, respects the intrinsic value of the land.” (Karen Madsen, 1994)

Gender-based difference may not only exist in landscape but also in architecture design theory. Margrit Kennedy suggested that there were several hypotheses based on female and male principles in

Looking back at twentieth century, women were praised for their good-natured skills for gardening. Two faculty members at Harvard University believed that "Women turn more naturally than men to landscape work." (Close, 1996) Henry Frost, the founder of The Cambridge School in 1915, agreed that female do better work than male in the field of residential design because "they have a flair for design related to the human and pay more attention to details." (Anderson, 1980). A social activist in Boston made such comment in 1902: "A woman has a feeling about dirt which men only pretend to have." (Lawson, 2012).

3.2 Female Landscape Forms

We can see designed landscape form as a cultural vehicle for gender construction. It conveys a designer's aesthetic experience including his/her sexuality as a whole. In this study, the idea of female landscape form proposed by Robert Riley refers to the forms "women designers themselves, free to create, would make for themselves—forms expressing their gender experience and their biological sexuality." Look into the field of fine art, there might be two common characteristics shared by feminist artists: First, artworks are often associated with the image of female body. Second, they are created in a way that may reflect the social beliefs of "mother nature". Female artists utilize organic mediums such as mud, seed, and grass to reconstruct the gender identities through creative process. The works of Ana Mendieta, Marie Yates, and Michelle Stuart have shown us how materials are collected to represent the feminist aesthetic.

In most cases, female landscape forms can be actually created by anyone since gender is "socially but not naturally constructed" (D.Garrard, 1994). There is a huge difference between the way people perceive landscape as creators and viewers. Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a good example to explain this idea. She addressed the creative process for Vietnam Veterans Memorial in her biography: "I think the most important aspect of the design was that I had originally designed it for a class I was taking at Yale and not for the competition. In that sense, I had designed it for me—or, more exactly, for what I believe it should be." However, a school project for her self-expression may not be perfectly accepted by public, at least to those who opposed to the design, it was a "black gash of shame" that generated considerably controversy (McGirr, 1994).

Figure 1. Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Photography by author).

3.3 Transition in Women’s Approaches to Design

Women’s history in landscape architecture is a broad topic. If we only look at the United States from the early twentieth century to the present, during the short period of the City Beautiful movement in late 1890s, female groups worked on various types of projects including street improvement, civic gardens and
playgrounds. This movement is recognized by planners and urban historians as grass-roots driven activity that focused on smaller projects completed by women, which is a direct contrast to the “classically-inspired, grand scale such as the white marble constructed, straight boulevards, and monumental architectures” that were planned by their male counterparts in a male-dominated political structures (Szczygiel, 2012). About the same time, children’s playgrounds became a project type with which women frequently got involved. In her article “Turn of the Century Women’s Organizations, Urban Design, and the Origin of the American Playground Movement” Suzanne Spencer-Wood mentioned women have deeply contributed to children’s playground design as social reformers. A playground as a social place for both children and mothers became significant for stepping out of the domestic domain and to enter the public one. During the 1930s and 1940s, Work opportunities for women in the landscape architecture business were dramatically reduced due to the impact of the Great Depression. However, in the 1940s housing shortage, females became competitive with male practitioners in the work involving residential yards, gardens and planting design due to their well-trained design skills as well as their horticultural knowledge (Spencer-Wood, 1994).

Landscape historian Thaisa Way, in her book: “Unbounded Practice: Women and Landscape Architecture in the Twentieth Century” suggests that typically women treat the home garden differently than men; other than a place for family entertainment and visual comfort, the home garden was an integral part of their own residence, and the whole community landscape. In contrast, men tend to treat the garden as a place for appearance and maintenance, and pay more attention to the construction details of the house for functional concern. That is, females may have a more sensitive and holistic idea of the residential landscape than males (Way, 2009).

World War II is a significant watershed for women’s changing role in the development of American landscape architecture. Before the war, most of the women professionals—well educated from high society—chose to work for high society. The garden designs of 1890-1930 historically titled the Country Place Era, female landscape architects mostly focused on the design of high-end residential projects where their artistic expression were highly visible (Streetfield, 2012). After the 1960s, although American society had experienced dramatic social and economic changes, women were not fully accepted in the design profession. After the 1970s, rising environmental awareness, ecological issues, and the feminist movement had a major influence on changing gender roles. Middle class women began to work in all types of professions, and female landscape architects were gradually getting involved in public affairs.

4 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of selecting a methodology is to examine the ideas we have gained from literature review. To better inform the study, this researcher conducted a survey in order to collect important information that may be directly related to research topics. In doing so, a series of first-hand data was available for analysis. We should be aware of the fact that the exploratory nature of this study may not lead to a firm conclusion, but should at least provide reliable results that help readers to identify the findings.

4.1 Survey Process

The first step of the survey process is to select the potential participants. The researcher had to look into a range of subjects who met the defined set of criteria. In order to ensure the reliability of the results, the participants should be knowledgeable enough to understand and answer the questions. With this in mind, the survey includes female landscape professionals who currently hold a managerial position in landscape architecture firms, including principals, project managers, licensed landscape architects, and contractors in the United States. Each of the potential subjects was sent an email request to participate in the survey with a questionnaire. Personal information of all participants will not be revealed for privacy concern.

4.2 Survey Questions

The written survey contained three questions as follows:

1. Would you think there are “female landscape forms” created by female landscape architect/designer?
2. What is your opinion about the statement “women’s design approaches are different than men’s”?

3. What do you think about the “transition in women’s design approaches” since the early 20th century when ASLA was founded to the present day?

4.3 Data Analyzing

The “Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques” set up a basic theoretical framework for data analysis: it includes readings and coding processes of the qualitative data from a written survey. Selective coding is defined as “The process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to the other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development.” (Anselm Strauss, 1990) Categories are referred to as the three research topics in this study.

5 ANALYSIS AND RESULT

A total of 83 survey questionnaires were sent out, and 21 were returned. The response rate was about 25%. All survey respondents are currently holding a principal position in a landscape architecture firms. Regarding the participants’ locations by state, about half (9 participants) are from California; one-third (7 participants) are from Massachusetts, and the rest are from New York, Connecticut, Tennessee and Texas. Other information including participants’ age, level of education, and experience in professional practice was not acquired. The following results will be built on the responses of 21 women professionals.

Table 1. Geographic distribution of survey participants.

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5.1 Female’s Approach to Landscape Design

According to the survey results, female design approaches can be (but are not necessarily) different from men’s. During the design process, women can be better communicators in design and they tend to consider more the emotional experiences of their clients. A respondent suggested: “I think we are more thoughtful about design. Men usually approach a problem with an engineering eye, while my female friends approach a problem with an artful eye, then make the engineering work for it.” Also, they tend to formulate more networking groups and collaborative efforts with other women designers. “Women in general work better with groups of people to build consensus and welcome collaboration with other disciplines in the design process,” another respondent pointed out: “They may be better listeners and more interested in addressing the needs of the user groups by encouraging their involvement, discussion, and input”. Females may bring a more collaborative spirit to the design process, which can be an advantage or disadvantage depending on the design and challenge at hand. Also, they “seem to make things more complicated while men keep things fairly simple.” “Men are more linear in the thoughts process while women are more geometric”, one participant said, “Men tend to follow a list regardless of priority, women synthesize and translate easier.”
In contrast, some of the survey participants would not distinguish between genders in a design oriented world. One respondent suggested: “I think the design process is non-gender specific. We all bring our personal sensibilities to our work, female or male. But they are more about personal aesthetic, background, education, travel...” another respondent said: “In my experience, I haven’t seen a difference between the approach of man and woman toward design. Most of my design mentors are male and I believed my design approaches are similar to theirs”, and still another said: “Landscape architecture is comprised in equal part the designer’s vision and the demands of the program and site. Designers rely on many influences as they develop their oeuvre – their personal history, and their education, among other things- which have tremendous influence on them. I do not believe gender would be primary.”

It is worth mentioning that some survey participants offered different viewpoints to this issue. One respondent pointed out: “I think that, insofar as people are acculturated to think of women and men as different in their thinking and psychology, there may be different design approaches assigned to women and men,” she continued: “But I also think that your inquiry only holds true for those few women who are either designing individually, or are the unquestioned lead designer on a project. In our current professional world, most landscape architects work as teams, and their gender is more likely to affect their power position in the company and on their teams than their design approach.” Also, one respondent suggested that even the question can be controversial when it singled out the design on the basis of gender: “This hypothesis was too broad and vague, although there might be some truth depending on what you mean, specifically. It might have more to do with the Mars and Venus thinking, and the collaborative vs. hierarchical comfort levels.”

5.2 Female Landscape Forms
First, there was a question from a survey respondent: “It depends upon how you’re using the term female. As an archetype/symbol, as biology, as social-cultural reality?” she continued: “Perhaps we are all influenced by everyone else; that is, men designers are influenced by women and vice versa (and by hermaphrodites, and by transgender people, and so forth). All these are currents of influence that could all be analyzed separately as female.” Also, one respondent was aware of “a social bias that considers some forms to be male and some to be female”. Five participants agreed that female landscape forms could be created by both genders. “I prefer curvilinear forms and shapes, which might be considered feminine” one said: “but I do not see this preference as gender based within the field of LA. I think that ‘female landscape forms’ are used by both genders.” Another one added: “Yes, I see female forms-forms that are organic, curvilinear, of the earth, by both female landscape architects and male landscape architects. I also see strong, rectilinear forms designed by both sexes as well.” “Landscape in itself is both male and female - Ying/yang sort of thing which if done correctly contains elements both masculine and feminine. That is nature. One could analyze certain styles of architecture and design to be very masculine = dark bold colors, angular large forms, modern Bauhaus type buildings, etc and a cooler palette, softer lines, Art Nouveau era to be feminine.” “I think of curvier, flowing forms as feminine (created by anyone) and angular forms as masculine (created by anyone).I think we all have varying doses of male and female energy.”

Besides, one respondent reminded me to be broader on this issue: “I think if we’re talking about gender issues in form making, we lose sight of the other gender identities and the forms that come from different perspectives or gender identities. It is bigger than male/female, it’s male/ female/ straight/ gay/ transgender and everything in between. I don’t think you can look at a landscape form and have any idea who created it.” One respondent concluded: “Good landscape design without specific forms come from both male and female designers, As a good designer you look for the poetry of the landscape expression. I would not distinguish between genders in order to achieve one or the other.”

5.3 Transitions in Women’s Design Approaches
According to the survey response, the transition shows the role women have played in landscape architecture has changed. “Early on we were merely ‘gardeners’ while today we are problem solvers.” One respondent pointed out. “I think first of how so many designers of the early 20th century were cast as “horticulturists” because they were women. I think it must have been very hard for them to break out of the stereotype that women were good at flowers and plants and men were to be relied on for bigger, bolder changes on the landscape.” Besides, respondents indicated that today female landscape architects are free to work however they choose. One respondent said: “My guess is we are less driven to be like men and more free to practice as we see fit. We do not have to play by the rules of the past. On our projects we are
recognized as equal members on design teams”. Another said: “I do think we have more freedom to openly
be ourselves, and more opportunity in the workplace.” “I would go further with that question on a global level
and not just look at the USA.” As one respondent put it, “I think more women took the opportunity to study
design and became professionals and there are many reasons for that….so not the approach changed but
the number of women influencing the design in general changed. Landscape as a whole went through a
huge transition and both genders contributed to it.” Besides, survey results shows gender inequality in
today’s landscape professions might have greatly improved. One participant pointed out: “I spent about 12
years working in the public sector. There were many rules being applied in the work force during the 1980’s
and ‘90’s in order to correct long-standing practices of discrimination and harassment based on gender
differences.” Another respondent suggested: “I have my own prejudiced perspective on this because I was
very happy at an all girl’s high school and then went to an all male Ivy League college where they were just
beginning to admit women. In the architecture department there I always felt like an outsider (professors
would address the class with “Now, men…”). Women were not so welcome. But that was 30 years ago and
I think it is much much better now.” The other respondent pointed out gender equality has yet to be improved
today, “I still perceive some prejudice in this part of the country. For example, when I tell people in western
Mass. where I live that I am studying landscape architecture, they remember only that I design gardens,
although that may be just a lack of ignorance about what landscape architects do. In fact the profession
may still be suffering from the mistaken notion that landscape work is just gardening work—like what women
do!”

Two survey participants offered different viewpoint to the issue. “I am unaware of this transitions”,
one recalled: “When I look back at early days of American landscape architecture, I see work that result
from strong professional training and education for male and female designers (though, of course, there
were many fewer female designers then). I see that good contemporary designs have similar roots.” “I think
the way designers approach their work has transitioned because of changes in knowledge, technology, land
use and other changes that have affected the entire profession,” another suggested: “I believe there are
proportionally more women landscape architects than there were at the founding of the ASLA, but I think
their design approach has evolved parallel to that of their male counterparts.”

As one participant concluded: “Early 20th Century women landscape architects worked for high
society. Today’s women landscape architects work for all society. The approaches can be somewhat
different depending on the different needs of people, but, in general, fulfilling the need of poor people and
of rich people both require an understanding of those needs, an understanding of the site to be designed,
the budget, and the maintenance support which will be available now and later.”

6 DISCUSSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

To sum up, this survey’s findings in female’s approaches to design generally correspond to the
literature review. Females might be more sensitive and thoughtful about design, they pay more attention to
issues regarding fairness justice, and equity; they also emphasize taking care of the needs of disadvantaged
groups such as children, and seeking connectedness among different things. Such characteristics may
result in collaborative approaches, taking clients’ emotions into consideration, and specializing in community,
school and playground projects. From this viewpoint, it may explain the ideas presented in “Seven
hypothoses on female and male principles in architecture”: “Female designers are more user-oriented than
designer-oriented” because they may have more empathy for users, especially minority groups. “Female
designers are more flexible than fixed” because they are more comfortable with mutability as a design
process. “Female designers are more complex than one-dimensional” perhaps due to the fact that it is
women’s nature to make things more complicated while men keep things fairly simple. “Female designers
are more holistic than specialized” because they might think inclusively and build connections in a holistic
way during decision making processes.

Turning to the discussion of “female landscape form”, according to the literature review, it refers to
the work created by female artists to reflect their lives and experiences. However, most of our survey
participants comes from the real business world of landscape architecture so they may have different
viewpoints to this issue than the artists who free to create for themselves. Therefore, this term may need
further clarification to fit more precisely into the discussion. That being said, the majority of the women who
participated in the survey agreed that “Female Landscape Forms” are products of social bias which can be
created by anyone.
Finally, findings suggest changes in female’s approaches to design parallel to the transitions in the entire design profession, which are due to changes in knowledge, technology, land use and other factors within society over time. This is not surprising because “landscape as a whole went through a huge transition and both genders contributed to it”. Women have much more freedom in the workplace but great challenges have followed. In general, women had lower social status than men in the early twentieth century, where gender discrimination occurred much more frequently than today. Therefore, few early successful women professionals would have had stronger advocates in issues of gender and practice against their male counterparts than today. Beatrix Jones and Ellen Shipmen, for instance, are considered pioneers who worked closely with male professionals as mentors and competitors (Krall, 2012).

Another issue that comes to mind is the geographic distribution of survey participants. Although the survey was conducted in western Massachusetts, the results show about half of the respondents are from the California area, which may indicate that female landscape architects in the west coast are more willing to answer gender-related questions. In addition, a nationwide survey suggested that the percentage of women having a licensed to practice in California is higher than any other state in the country (Clements, 2012).

A livable environment in California has provided rich and diverse cultural settings for talented landscape artists to create vital communities. A 2011 documentary “Women in the Dirt” directed by Carolann Stoney introduced seven female landscape architects from the west coast of the United States. This film not only raised public awareness on beauty and sustainability in our surroundings, but also remarked on their groundbreaking works in a poetic way. However, throughout the movie, we did not see any specific approach to landscape design that only women would take. In that sense, one of the most important findings in this study is not to address how or why female may design differently than male, but to suggest that gender stereotypes do not necessarily align with our expectations. To avoid the fallacy of binary thinking, as Elizabeth Meyer has reminded us earlier, we must be carefully examining the gender affiliation in the built landscape. Finally, I am fascinated by the hypothesis that “the men who are attracted to LA are more in touch with their anima (Carl Jung) than most American males.” Do you agree with this statement? Perhaps we all have male/female side that may potentially influence our design thinking. This issue deserves more in-depth explorations from researchers in our discipline.

7 REFERENCES


