

Gender Studies in Architecture

Space, power and difference

Dörte Kuhlmann



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Analyzing a range of ideas from biological, evolutionary and anthropological theories to a variety of feminist, psychoanalytic, poststructuralist and constructivist discourses, this book provides a comprehensive introduction to the problematics of gender and power in architectural and urban design.

Topics range from conceptions of postulated matriarchal architecture in Old Europe to contemporary technologies of control; from the mechanisms of gaze to architectural performatives; from the under-representation of women in the planning profession to the integration of gender issues within the curriculum.

The particular strengths of the book lie in its inclusiveness and critical analysis. It is not a partisan defence of feminism or any other theory, but a critical introduction to the issues relating to gender. Moreover, the conclusions reach beyond a narrow gender studies perspective to social and ethical considerations that are unavoidable in any responsible architectural or urbanistic practice.

With its broad range and balanced analysis of different theories, the book is valuable as an overview of gender studies in architecture and useful for any designer who is concerned with the social effects of the built environment.

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To Madita

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Chapter 1

Introduction

When in 1907 the well-known nuclear physicist Lise Meitner left Vienna as a young Ph.D. to further her education at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-University in Berlin, she was on her arrival treated very differently than her male colleagues because at that time women were not yet officially admitted as students in any university in Prussia. The head of the university's Chemistry Institute, and winner of the Nobel Prize, Professor Emil Hermann Fischer was known for not allowing female students in his institute rooms or in his lectures. When attending lectures, the studious Austrian had to hide in the space beneath the staggered wooden benches of the lecture hall, as it had been made clear to her that she was not wanted on the premises. She was initially also denied access to the chemistry laboratory, though Fischer eventually agreed on the condition that she would stay in the cellar of the Institute and never set foot in the upper floors. It was on such a condition that Meitner began her work in Berlin in a former woodworking workshop in the cellar of the Chemistry Institute, with a separate entrance and without a washroom. Although Max Planck, who at that time was teaching a course in Berlin on theoretical physics, missed no opportunity to fulminate against 'mental Amazons', Meitner was finally able to convince the scientist of her abilities. He allowed her to attend his lectures, and in 1912 he even appointed her as his first university assistant.¹

But not all male scientists allowed themselves to be impressed by the young woman's performance. At the beginning of her career, Meitner, an ambitious researcher, had already published a number of articles under the name L. Meitner. Impressed by the articles, the publisher of the German Brockhaus Encyclopaedia asked Meitner to write an entry on radio-activity. Since she signed the reply to Brockhaus with her full name, it then became apparent that she was a woman. As Meitner recalled, the publisher replied stating he would never publish an article written by a woman.²

For the purposes of the present study, it is not necessary to dig deeper into Meitner's biography. What I want to emphasize in this context are the visual, spatial and architectural dimensions of the means by which she was subordinated. In this example, these means were directly and demonstratively represented by the lecture halls and laboratories of the prestigious university, which were rooms and structures accessible only to certain groups and from which other groups – in this case all women

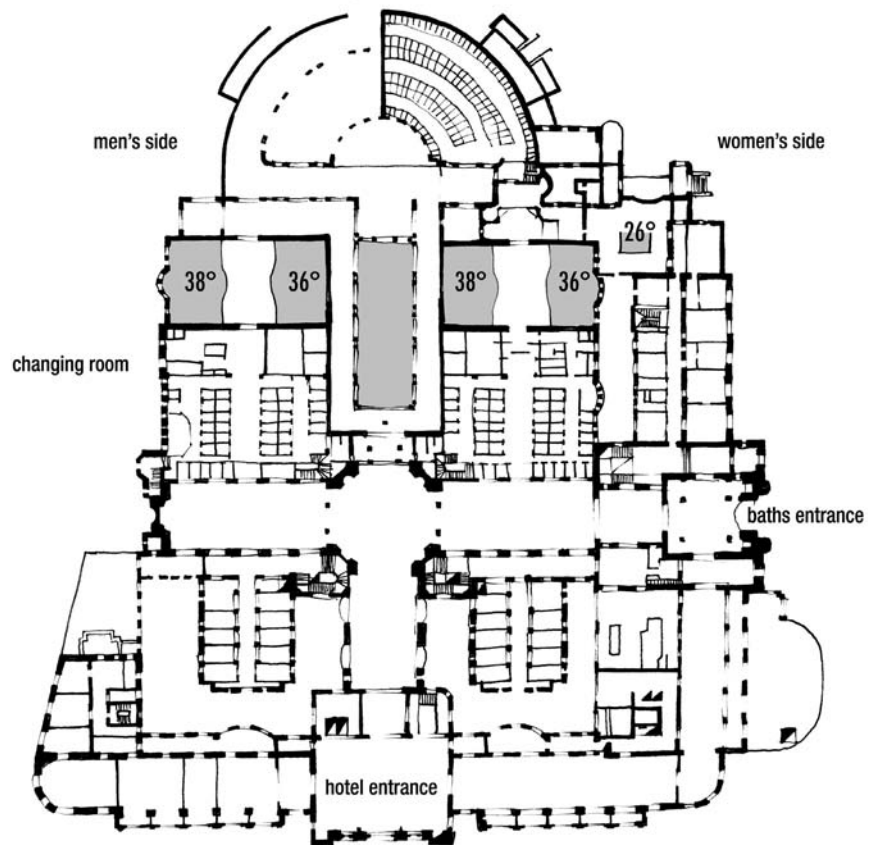
regardless of their academic qualifications – were explicitly excluded. At that time this form of gender separation was common in many buildings, private homes, religious and secular institutions, hospitals, military buildings, and sanitary facilities. For example, British women in the nineteenth century who wanted to listen to political debates in the old House of Commons were subjected to similar circumstances as those Meitner had encountered. Without a voice and unseen, they had to hide in order to partake in the knowledge of men. They were expected to stay seated, hidden away in an attic room of the building, and follow the discussions of the men below through ventilator openings in the ceiling.³ Not only were the women in both cases told that if at all possible they should not be seen in the building, but also they had to assume a degrading bodily position that demonstrated to them physically that they were on forbidden territory.

However, measures with the purpose of hiding certain groups, in particular women, from the sight of others or excluding them altogether were not enacted exclusively for special state buildings. They were quite common and widely accepted, mainly in the representative architecture of the time which was characterized by a strikingly accentuated allocation of space.⁴ In such buildings the planned use of space sometimes indicates very strict social hierarchies and distinct gender differentiation. The staff were assigned their own servants' entrances and hidden staircases, often separated according to gender, while the gentry claimed exclusive access through the magnificently designed main entrances. Sometimes the hierarchy of room allocation went so far that the servants were only allowed to move around in spaces that were not actual rooms, but spaces inside the walls. In many palaces, such as the Schönbrunn palace in Vienna, the thick walls concealed narrow, dark passages through which the servants had to squeeze in order to light the mighty tiled stoves from behind, without being seen by the gentry. Some rulers were extremely creative in maintaining the largest possible service staff without being exposed to their eyes and without having to allow them access to their private rooms. It is known that King Ludwig II of Bavaria had such an aversion to his servants that his Linderhof and Herrenchiemsee palaces each had a so-called magic table (see [Figure 1.1](#)): the dining table could be lowered to a floor below where the food was laid out by the servants so that the king did not have to come face to face with them.⁵

In Western culture today social and gender-specific room divisions are usually less obvious, but even in recent architecture history there are several examples of rooms which for one reason or another are assigned to one sex only, are off limits to the other sex or are divided along gender lines. Many of these rooms also serve the purpose of strengthening the social practices and hierarchies of the sexes in those places. This is particularly obvious in those religious buildings where the practiced rituals and traditions subordinate one sex. Thus, Roman Catholic women have not been allowed as a rule the same rights as men to use all the rooms in a church. Usually, even nuns are forbidden to enter the area beyond the rood screen while altar boys, deacons and priests are allowed to enter that area to celebrate the mass. Often, women have not even been allowed to look at the high altar and the presbytery, which

1.1

'Magic table',
Herrenchiemsee,
about 1885



1.2

Floorplan, Gellert
Baths, Budapest
(Architect: Hegedüs,
Sebestien, Sterk)

were screened from view over the entire width of the sanctuary. The only time women got access to the area was as charwomen, cleaning the space after the service.⁶

Ironically, sometimes buildings to which women were denied access were adorned with female bodies. An example from the modern age with a commercial use are the Gellert Baths in Budapest, which often feature in the city's tourism brochures and postcards. The building, designed by Armin Hegedüs, Artur Sebestyeyen and Izidor Sterk, has a floorplan that is divided into two almost identical halves connected in the middle by a pool to which both sexes have access (see [Figure 1.2](#)). When it opened in 1911, as a combination of spa and hotel, it attracted an international clientele from the upper social classes. The exterior facade of the complex has a monumental design, while in the interior glossy tiles, mosaics and frescoes were used to give the facility an appearance that was as rich and ostentatious as possible. The indoor pools, divided according to sex, originally had identical layouts, each with two thermal baths and two steam baths. However, on closer inspection, it becomes apparent that the side reserved for men is much more richly ornamented than the side for women. For that reason, tourist guidebooks and postcards always only show the interior of the men's side, and for advertising purposes women are usually photographed in the male rooms. It can be assumed that female users of the day never learned that the rooms reserved for men were decorated much more elaborately and expensively. Even today, this is only apparent from the photographs that hang in the long hallways of the baths. But excluding women from certain spaces and using their bodies as alluring embellishment are only two possible strategies to express sexual hierarchies in architecture.

The architectural construction of gender

The above examples indicate that social standards sometimes manifest themselves in architecture, and that architecture may also contribute to strengthening social conceptions and behaviour patterns. As Bill Hillier notes:

At the very least . . . a building is both a physical and spatial transformation of the situation that existed before the building was built. Each aspect of this transformation, the physical and the spatial, already has . . . a social value, in that the physical form of the building may be given further significance by the shaping and decoration of elements, and the spatial form may be made more complex, by conceptual or physical distinctions, to provide a spatial patterning of activities and relationships.⁷

This argument – that social structures are in the last analysis spatial – has in fact been evident in many theories of architecture since the publication of Henri Lefebvre's *La production de l'espace* (1974) and Michel Foucault's *Surveiller et punir* (1975).⁸

In defining the production of space, Lefebvre differentiates between *spatial practice* (how space is perceived), *representations of space* (how space is imagined or depicted) and *representational spaces* (the space we live in).⁹ The main argument of

Lefebvre's theory is that the entire social space is derived from the body and that all space has a social meaning. The social dimension is then not a contingent characteristic of certain kinds of spaces: everything is ontologically spatial. It follows that the borders between objects and the self are contingent. Space, as well as society, participates in constructing the limits of the self, but the self is also projected onto society and space.¹⁰

The mediating element between the self as a living reality and society's spatial-architectural structures is the body. The argument that social and political power affect and are affected by the physical body was convincingly made by Foucault, who writes:

The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs . . . the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body.¹¹

As far as it is true that the body is a necessary element in the power structures of society, architecture can also be assigned an important role. That is why, apart from Foucault himself, many of his followers, such as Paul Rabinow and Richard Sennett, have shown examples of how architecture can contribute to disciplining.¹²

A third variant of French theory which has had a significant influence on studies of power, space and body comes from Pierre Bourdieu and his theory of rituals in the form of *habitus*.¹³ In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu defined *habitus* as a generative system of 'durable, transposable dispositions' that emerges out of a relation to wider objective structures of the social world. As an internalized collection of durable dispositions to think, feel and act, *habitus* is, according to Bourdieu, like a 'conductorless orchestration' giving systematicity, coherence and consistency to an individual's practices.¹⁴ Helen Hills, for example, has argued that Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* is an essential factor in the constitution of gender roles and that it constructs different roles mainly through the material culture of space:

Space, the fundamental aspect of material culture, is . . . of central importance in constituting gender. It determines how men and women are brought together or kept apart; it participates in defining a sexual division of labour; its organization produces, reproduces and represents notions about sexuality and the body. Space determines and affects behaviour, just as the organization of space is produced by and in relation to behaviour.¹⁵

While Hills's main point is valid, this particular statement illustrates some problems with the rhetoric of the 'spatial turn' in the social sciences. Occasionally in such writings space takes on almost mythical dimensions and becomes a social force. When Hills says that 'space' keeps men and women apart, she probably means that

there is a spatial separation between men and women, either through distance or material (e.g. through non-spatial elements such as walls). Here space is nothing but another word for the coming together of, or separation between, men and women, and not the 'force' that has caused it. Hills argues further that space participates in defining the sexual division of labour, but this statement contributes little to the first statement, since she already claims that space participates in gender-based separation in general. When she says that 'space also determines and controls behaviour, just as the organization of space is produced and controlled by behaviour', we must ask what the second half of the sentence actually means. She seems to be saying that space is not organized by itself or supernatural forces, but by humans. That is very probable, but theoretically vacuous, since there are many spatial structures that were formed either by natural forces (topography, rivers, etc.) or by coincidence, including non-human accidents. To claim that space is organized in relation to behaviour (the human behaviour of architects, social planners, police, etc.) seems to be a complicated way of saying that those who change the spatial organization of the environment do it because they believe that it has consequences: architects may believe that they can fulfil certain functions when they design a building in a certain way, for example a kindergarten, while the same planners would choose another spatial system for the design of a prison which they expect to prevent some forms of behaviour.

Although most of Hills's ambitious declaration turns out to be a complicated way of stating generally accepted banalities, her general goal is shared by the present text that also examines to what extent architecture uses its spatial and non-spatial means to influence the production, reproduction and representation of gender and the body. The methods used to achieve this in Western architecture thus far are very diverse and complex. It is therefore useful to look at concrete examples and to take a closer look at some of the measures employed. Instead of the obvious analysis of prisons, military barracks or religious buildings, we will use the example of a private home designed by one of the most lauded architects of the twentieth century.

Villa Mairea

Among the (male) masters of modern architecture, the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto is habitually described as the one most concerned with the human being and social values as well as nature. Those attributes have seemed so plausible to most architecture critics that they have seldom if ever been challenged. However, when we look at these attributes critically, we find them to be what Jacques Lacan and Claude Lévi-Strauss in the 1960s called '*signifiants flottant*', the floating signifiers of language.¹⁶ By this they meant a number of significant factors that cannot really be allocated to a signifier, but which can be used in general linguistic usage. In that sense, attributes like 'human', 'organic' or 'natural' are also often used in architectural criticism, although it is extremely difficult to define exactly what they mean.

Let us take a step back. It was Sigfried Giedion in the second edition of his influential book *Space, Time and Architecture – The Growth of a New Tradition*

that established Alvar Aalto's reputation as the 'human' architect connected with nature, and in doing so helped him achieve great popularity.¹⁷ Perhaps under the influence of Schelling or Hegel, Giedion liked to organize historical developments in a trinity (thesis, antithesis, synthesis). He formulated usually extreme dualities which he then rejected in order to find the best solution in the blending of opposites into a 'higher third'. In the early 1920s, functionalism, particularly in Germany, had fought battles on two fronts: on the one hand against the outpourings of expressionism after the First World War, and on the other against conservative tendencies that returned to the styles from the Deutscher Werkbund (German Work Federation) circa 1910 or, even further back, to local traditions, the *Heimastil*. A harbinger of *temps nouveaux*, Le Corbusier preached the logic of geometrical forms and abstract materiality. However, this ultra-rational architecture lost much of its popular appeal around 1930, perhaps as an architectural echo of the Great Depression. Since the early thirties, Giedion had sought a counter-position to the heroic Corbusian functionalism and emphasized the need for irrationality, which he associated with surrealism, organic forms and natural materials. Although Le Corbusier himself had started introducing traditional materials and forms into his villa designs as early as 1929, Giedion found Aalto to be a more suitable figurehead for the new kind of modernism occupying a middle position between romantic and machine-aesthetic tendencies in architecture.¹⁸ Coming from exotic, 'unspoilt' Finland, Aalto was in Giedion's mind able to tap into nature in a way that would heal the split personality of modern man, the disconnect between thinking and feeling.

This interpretation of the 'natural' and 'human' in Aalto's architecture was emphasized, for example, with regard to his design for apartment buildings in Berlin and Bremen in post-war Germany. Referring to his Hansaviertel block, the Swiss magazine *Werk* praised Aalto's 'extraordinary close, practical, psychological, and pure human relation' towards problems of dwelling and claimed that the Finnish architect, in contrast to his colleagues, did not build 'theories' but rather 'designed . . . a life-sustaining environment of a purity and intimacy unequalled by any other building at the exhibition'. The German magazine *Bauwelt* came to a similar conclusion:

Aalto also came and built among all of those rectangular boxes a building which, despite being mass housing, accommodates issues of orientation, privacy, and the diverse wishes of the occupants under one roof. It is not without reason that precisely Aalto's building was described as the most human: scale, material and consideration of the function of dwelling led to that judgment.¹⁹

In such reviews, 'human architecture' is usually contrasted with the representative architecture of authority, and the quality of humanness also suggests democratic values, including equality and respect for the individual.

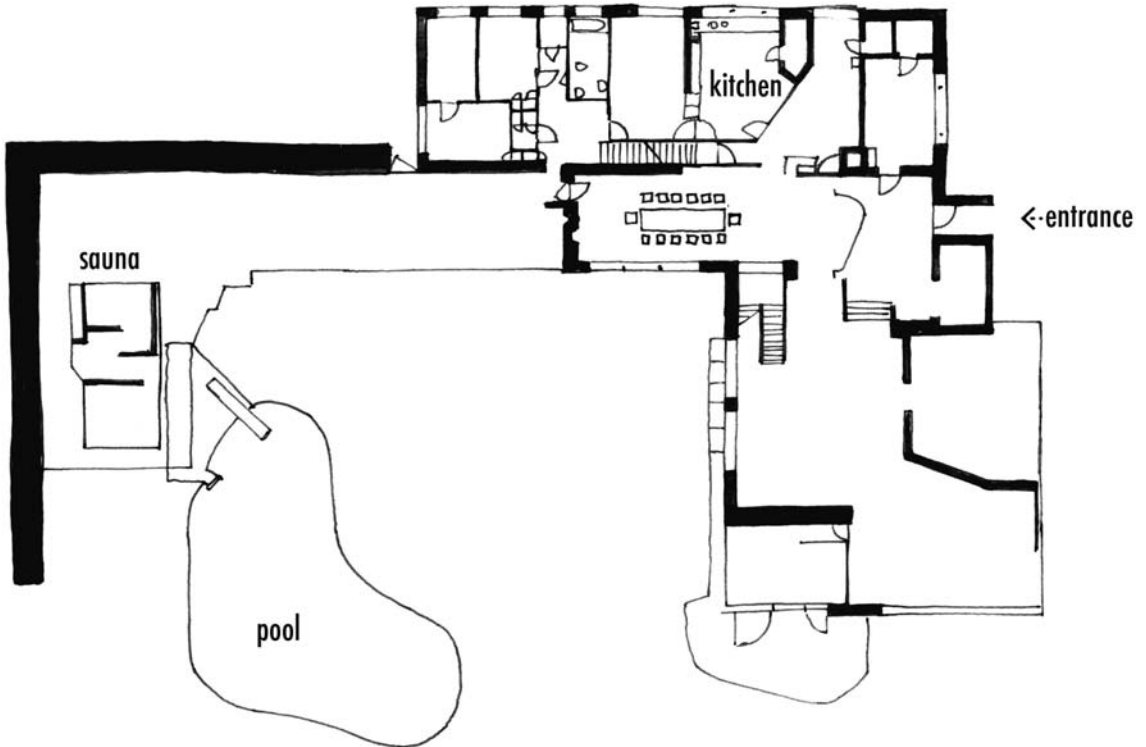
In the present context the question arises how Aalto's 'human' and 'social' architecture relates to social or gender-related roles that often create imbalances and inequalities. It is particularly informative to examine how the architect considered the traditional family when he planned a home. The best example is the Villa Mairea, a private house Aalto and his wife Aino designed in 1937–39 for Maire and Harry Gullichsen in Noormarkku, Finland (see [Figure 1.3](#)).²⁰ Both the architects and the clients claimed that the luxurious house was meant as a model for later social housing projects, 'a laboratory experiment of sorts in which things can be done that would be impossible with present-day mass production'.²¹

With this example we must be aware of the fact that the house was built at a time when the understanding of gender roles was very strongly pronounced in Finland as well. Maire Gullichsen, née Ahlström, was the heiress of the largest private company in the country, A. Ahlström Osakeyhtiö, and her husband Harry was the young CEO of the company with its headquarters in Noormarkku. Even though Maire had studied painting in Fernand Leger's small academy in Paris and kept in touch with the French avant-garde, as a patron of architecture she took a rather conservative position as regards the functional structure of the house, as well as the employment of servants.²²

Traditionally, the dining room (see [Figure 1.4](#)) of a bourgeois home plays an important symbolic role, because this is the site for the ritual of shared meals that strengthens the cohesion of the family. Seen formally, the ground-floor dining room in Villa Mairea is a rectangular room, and it occupies the most important strategic position. Indeed, the family's seating arrangement seems to reflect a social hierarchy and contribute to a reproduction of traditional gender roles: on the one hand, the position of the head of the household at the head of the table is emphasized symbolically and also functionally because he can control the entire public area of the ground floor of the house. From his seat at the dining table, the head of the household can look across the low wall into the main entrance area (see [Figure 1.5](#)). If he looks sideways through the adjacent window, he can see across the yard and control the entire living room (see [Figure 1.6](#)). In terms of symbolism, the fireplace behind



1.3
Villa Mairea,
Noormarkku, 1939
(Architect: Aino and
Alvar Aalto)



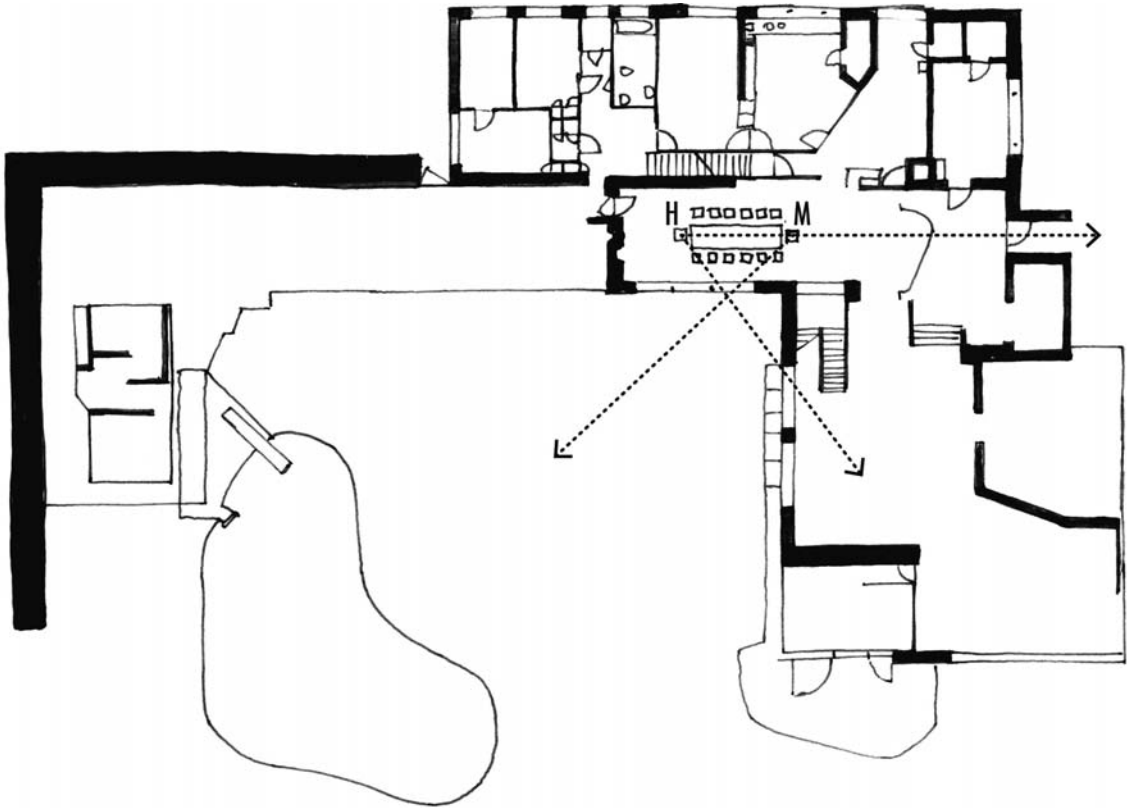
1.4
Ground floor,
Villa Mairea



1.5
View from Harry's
place, dining room,
Villa Mairea

him and the door to the garden could be interpreted as an indication of power and freedom respectively. On the other hand, the woman of the house is placed at the opposite end of the table, with her back to the entrance (see Figure 1.7). Klaus Herdeg notes that the wife could look at her husband's silhouette against the asymmetric fireplace, while through the window she can see the sauna, the pool, the garden courtyard and the pine forest – all natural or traditional elements. The man would see those things only in an artificial reflection as mirrored in the windows of the living room.²³ The door nearest the woman's chair leads to the kitchen, which is not a living space, but a work area screened off in the servant wing. This part, which only serves the purpose of internal provisioning, is not subject to the man's control, but formally oriented to the position of the dining table. The organization of the dining room in connection with the seating arrangement at the table is a clever constellation that subtly underlines the gender roles. We can see here parallels to Beatriz Colomina's interpretation of two famous houses by Adolf Loos, Haus Moller in Vienna and Haus Müller in Prague. Colomina demonstrates how, on the one hand, lines of view run from preferred points through the building, and, on the other hand, the arrangement of gender-designated rooms highlights the social role of individual occupants.²⁴

Other spatial constellations can be found in Villa Mairea which positively call for this type of interpretation. The rooms present themselves partly as private versus public areas, and partly as 'male' versus 'female' terrain. The library is



1.6
Harry's and Maire's
lines of view, dining
room, Villa Mairea

1.7
View from Maire's
place, dining room,
Villa Mairea

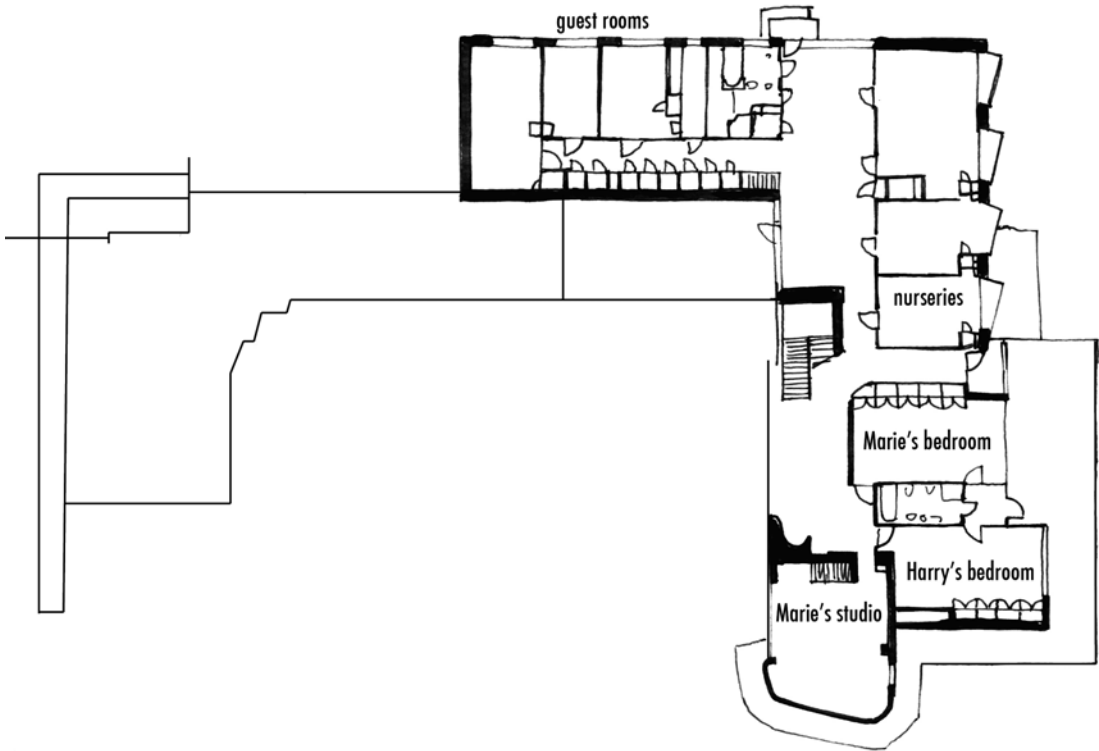
1.8

Maire's studio,
Villa Mairea

traditionally a male terrain, and indeed that is where the husband's office can be found. As in many of Loos's villas, the female home owner's own special room is positioned in an elevated point in the heart of the house. In Haus Müller, for example, the ladies' lounge is located above the entrance to the living room. In the Villa Mairea, where the female space is Maire Gullichsen's atelier, it is similarly raised and separated from the other rooms (see [Figure 1.8](#)).

The lines of vision inside and outside the house can also be interpreted as having symbolic and performative meanings. Thus, a vista extends from Harry Gullichsen's office to the river, representing the power and continuous production of the paper mill he ran, because the logs to be processed were floated down the river to the factory. From his office he could also oversee the entrance to the Villa Mairea so that no one could enter or leave the house unseen. By contrast, from her studio windows, Maire would only see the courtyard and trees that were there for domestic enjoyment rather than industrial use. She would primarily control the interior of the house, in particular the children playing in the garden, while her husband would be able to watch over the outside space around the house from the library.

Upstairs, where the bedrooms of the family and guests are situated, gender roles and hierarchies are apparent from the order of the rooms. The children have their own bedrooms, and a hierarchical development can be seen from the guest rooms via the children's rooms to Maire's and finally Harry's bedroom (see [Figure 1.9](#)). However, this spatial sequence ends with Maire's studio. As the mother, she takes the middle position between her husband and the children; as a painter and an Ahlström, she occupies the climax of the plan configuration, practically constituting the essence of the house, named *Villa Mairea* after her. From upstairs, only a small, almost secret, door leads to her studio (see [Figure 1.10](#)). Inside the studio is a tiny stairway leading to a gallery. In that sense, Maire herself is hidden while she is enthroned – as guardian of the house – in the organic crown of the villa. Sometimes in accounts of the building Maire's studio is described as being autonomous, but in fact it is oriented toward the interior of the house instead of the exterior.



1.9
Floorplan, top floor,
Villa Mairea



1.10
Fireplace in front
of Maire's studio,
Villa Mairea

Perhaps because art is often associated with nature and the irrational, the studio could be read as representing a huge tree (see [Figure 1.11](#)). Just like the entrance to the house, the studio has organic lines, constituting a transition to nature. From this point of view, the diagonal white supports or *piloti* below the studio balcony, which have no supporting function at all, might be regarded as birch trees. At one stage, they had been erased from the design, but Maire Gullichsen insisted that they be put back in. On the one hand, the studio's isolated position in the house might highlight the artist's own sphere, but on the other hand, Maire can be seen as a



1.11
Mairea's studio from
the outside

prisoner in the studio. The woman locked in a tower is a motif that occurs, for example, in the fairy tale of Rapunzel or in the Greek myth of Danae. The door to the balcony with the walk-around does provide an optical closeness to nature, but it stays out of reach. The only way out of the studio is through the general living area, which is under the man's control.

In sum, then, the woman of the house is elevated through her organically formed tree-like studio and can thus be seen as part of nature. In this case, however, the woman's tree is artificial, built of materials produced by her husband in her father's and grandfather's mill, suggesting that femininity may be a masculine fiction.²⁵ While many traditional ideologies praise women for their closeness to nature, Villa Mairea seems to resonate with the constructivist views of feminist theorists, summed up by Simone de Beauvoir's slogan: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.'²⁶

If the gender roles embodied in the configuration of Villa Mairea are contingently constructed rather than inevitably natural, a similar argument could also be made concerning the allegedly organic character of the building. While many critics find that the villa grows out of the local nature with the naturalness and specificity of a plant, the design actually conjures up this atmosphere by cleverly combining Corbusian modernism with allusions to Karelian farmhouses, echoes of Japanese architecture and motifs taken from exotic constructions that the Aaltos had seen at the Paris World Expo of 1937. It may well be that the description of any architecture as 'natural' can only be a metaphor. Social meanings, by contrast, are as essential to architecture as social organization.

Is it reasonable, however, to claim that one of the functions of Villa Mairea would have been to organize gender roles in a particular way? One can legitimately doubt whether Harry Gullichsen would really have kept an eye on the doorways on those few occasions when he was in his office in the house. To understand the point of the present analysis, however, one has to accept that a house or one part of it can have a function that is not enacted. One part of the Villa Mairea is described as a sauna because it has a disposition or a capability to be used as one, and it will not stop being a sauna at the moment when the last bather closes the door. Moreover, Harry Gullichsen's office at the Villa functions as a control point in the same way as the central tower in a panopticon prison: the presence of the warden is a necessary fiction, rather than an actual fact. The present book explores how gender is embodied in architecture, not a historical examination of how buildings have actually been used.

Chapter 2

Women in the history of art and architecture

In 1991, when Robert Venturi was presented with the Pritzker Architecture Prize, he went on the record as saying: ‘It is a bit of a disappointment that the prize didn’t go to me and Denise Scott Brown, because we are married not only as individuals, but as designers and architects.’¹ Indeed, Venturi and Scott Brown, who first met at the University of Pennsylvania in 1960, developed most of the important designs of their office together, but for which Venturi in the end received the prestigious award. Scott Brown has been officially named as project partner since the 1970s. But it is not even unusual in the history of architecture for female architects to be totally ignored. With a certain amount of sarcasm, Karen Kingsley has written that of all the books on the history of architecture, Kenneth Frampton’s *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (first edition 1980) deals most thoroughly with both sexes, since it mentions as many as four female artists, designers or architects: Gertrude Jekyll (a landscape architect), Charlotte Perriand, Margaret MacDonald MacIntosh and Lilly Reich.² Of course, considering the number of women architects who were working in the period discussed in the book, this is a frightening statistic. However, the criticism of Frampton is not quite accurate because in the main text he does in fact mention more than the above four – also mentioned are Alison Smithson, Jane Drew, Ann Tyng, Eileen Gray, Sophie Tauber-Arp, Aino Aalto and Denise Scott Brown – although not all of these women are listed in the index.

Even with written works which explicitly carry the names of their women authors, there is still ignorance with regard to female contributions. This is an experience Denise Scott Brown already went through with the book *Learning from Las Vegas* (first edition 1972), which is nowadays regarded as a classic in architecture theory. Although she wrote it together with Robert Venturi and Steve Izenour, Venturi is usually named as the sole author. She commented:

As a wife, I am very happy to see my husband honoured, but as a collaborator I feel very unhappy to see my work attributed to Bob . . . We have developed a body of theory together that owes a great deal to both of us. It is difficult to unseam it.³