



LINA Feminist Architecture Design Studio: a didactic experience towards inclusive and democratic cities

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Abstract. This text reflects on the urgency and potential of integrating a feminist perspective in architecture and its education, historically conceived from an androcentric vision that suppressed the voice of women and minoritised social groups. In this context, the experience of the inter-university virtual programme LINA Feminist Architecture Design Studio is presented, which has been running since 2020 for 400 students from 15 architecture schools in Latin America. Its goal is to stimulate future professionals who base their spatial practices with a true sense of inclusion, equity, diversity and innovation. Far from reaching a conclusion or showing an exemplary educational model, these notes aim to invite us to think about the role of education in transforming cities into more just and democratic places.

Keywords: Cities, Feminism, Architectural education.

1 Questioning the architectural canon

Access to habitat as a human right, the growing awareness of integrating gender issues into the design and re-design of cities and the multiplication of actions aimed at making visible the contributions of women in the built environment, constitute a social, cultural and political context that both erodes traditional forms and calls for new pedagogies with a gender perspective when training students in the field of architecture, urbanism and landscape.

Architecture is not a neutral discipline and historically it has been thought, legitimised and taught from an androcentric, binary - female/male, private/public - and racist vision that has suppressed the voice of women and minority and/or minoritised groups in spatial design: LGTBQI+, children, elderly, disabled, migrants, aboriginal communities. This biased view cuts across all aspects of architecture, but is particularly relevant in education, as this is the moment when students acquire not only knowledge and tools but also values that they will later develop in practice.

The first form of gender-based violence is representation at the institutional level, of which the University of Buenos Aires is one of the most brutal cases despite its international prestige. Since its creation in 1821, it has had 82 rectors, all of them men. In Architecture, there has only been one female dean since 1907. Although 60% of the students, 58% of the graduates and half of the teaching staff are women, the faculty has

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only 21% female full professors. And these imbalances are much more dramatic in architecture design studios, a real male territory. There are 27 courses with all male professors in charge of their six levels - Architecture 1 to 4, Urban Project, Architectural Project. The persistence of the patriarchal model of the atelier where the male architect is the most capable to lead the design studio, the absence of a programme to support the academic growth of women and a system where spaces are distributed among patriarchal political groupings (male and female) instead of merit, are some of the factors of this inequity.

Another issue is that the design studios reproduce in the theoretical training - bibliography, lectures, tours - of the students the canon with which the history of architecture has been narrated: the figure of the great master architects and their iconic works. [1] This perspective has omitted women's works or referenced them to their male partners, producing severe historiographical voids. [2] It is the right of women not only to regain their place in the books but also to have a feminist history of architecture. [3] The same has happened with any architect or work that does not fit into this canon.

An example is Le Corbusier, whom historiography has legitimised as a legend or a lone hero. The women architects who were partners in his works are rarely mentioned: Charlotte Perriand, Jane Drew, Blanche Lemco and Urmila Eulie Chowdhury. But it is also remarkable how his partner Pierre Jeanneret, who played a key role in many buildings, was overshadowed. Or Iannis Xenakis, the engineer and composer who innovatively combined architecture, music and mathematics. With the same criteria, 17 buildings from various countries - Germany, Argentina, Belgium, Belgium, France, India, Japan, Switzerland - have been included in the World Heritage List, where all these professionals have participated and the denomination of this serial property was "Architectural work of Le Corbusier - Exceptional Contribution to the Modern Movement". Again, architecture as a heritage, i.e. a testimony of the past that deserves to be valued and conserved, has reinforced the idea of canon. [4]

A further issue in education is the lack of a deeper consideration of the social dimension in the design process. Architectural explorations are generally designed for abstract users or take a superficial approach to issues related to new forms of social coexistence. The sexual division of labor, the impact of care work on women and the specific needs of the elderly, children and the disabled are topics that architecture cannot ignore. Likewise, the direct contact of students with users and the community in order to think collaboratively about architecture is still poorly applied in didactic strategies. [5]

In this context, architecture schools find the opportunity to integrate a feminist perspective as a theoretical and methodological underpinning. First of all, this means understanding what feminism is. According to Diana Maffia, feminism, despite its evolutions and many interpretations, accepts three principles. Firstly, a descriptive principle that recognises that women and diversities are at a disadvantage in all societies. Secondly, a prescriptive principle that values these asymmetrical relations as a problem. Thirdly, a practical principle or actions aimed at avoiding and changing gender inequality. [6]

It is within the framework of this feminist philosophy that we can refer to the concept of gender perspective or a conceptual and methodological tool which, when used, allows us to review and analyse social relations with a critical eye, in order to understand why women are at a political, economic and cultural disadvantage in relation to men. It will be useful to transform these inequalities and to incorporate women's rights into public policies, projects and programmes. [7] Another major achievement of feminism was the concept of intersectionality, or the phenomenon whereby people suffer oppression or discrimination or gain privileges on the basis of belonging to more than one social category - gender, ethnicity, class, age, nationality - within the complex and intertwined power relations that occur between them. [8]

In recent years, feminism has gained strength all over the world. Feminist demonstrations in the streets, laws on gender identity, protocols on gender violence in universities and public administration. In architecture, several initiatives have emerged to make the role of women more visible, such as the pioneering blog *Un día / Una arquitecta* (One day/ one-woman architect) created by Inés Moisset in Argentina in 2015, which publishes a biography every day, or the *MoMoWo* project dedicated to highlighting the women of the Modern Movement in Europe. The International Congress on Architecture and Gender in 2023 celebrates its fifth edition in Valencia.

In Argentina, there are valuable spaces: NGO CICSA Feminist Cities led by Ana Falú, research groups - Observatory of Urban and Territorial Phenomena at the University of Tucumán [9], GADU Programme at the University of Buenos Aires -, the programme *Nuestras Arquitectas*, feminist collectives -*Arquelarre* in Rosario [10], *La Ciudad que Resiste* in La Plata [11] - professional networks -*Soy Arquitecta.net*-.

However, all this progress was not reflected in the architectural design education. Faced with this urgency and educational opportunity, I considered it important to create a feminist design studio. With the architect Juan Alonso, we developed a programme that, although it began in 2020, is the result of our trajectory as teachers in this field. This allowed us to know which didactic criteria needed to be changed, but also how to maintain those valuable aspects of "learning-by-doing" that architectural training implies. Likewise, the course on Heritage and Gender and the workshop *Nuestras Arquitectas* (Our Women Architects), together with Inés Moisset, were a precedent. [12] Last but not least, we understand feminism as a militancy and a way of life, unlike gender studies that can analyse reality, but do not risk transforming it.

2 A feminist design studio

LINA Platform Laboratory>Intervention + Architecture is a global platform for research and design experimentation around cultural heritage founded in 2018 and based in Argentina. LINA builds a network that grows every day to promote a more just, humane and inclusive world. With a spirit of collective and participatory knowledge creation, its activities are carried out in collaboration with universities, NGOs, professional and community associations and activists. Its projects are oriented towards:

flexible and constantly evolving network of know-how. A distinctive point is that we value opinions and ideas as much as the dreams, experiences and stories of each member of the team. Another issue has to do with the richness of forming a working team with people from very different territories and contexts.

LINA's permanent team is made up of teachers with different levels of experience, from student assistants to professionals with a long career in the field of urban-architectural projects. Team 2023 is integrated by Juliana Kersul, Guille Alegre, Natacha Amione, Giuliana Sabelli, Sela Sansalone, Carolina Jara, Matias Cósser Alvarez, Yamila González, Agustina Atili, Sofia Ruciani, Lucía Solari, Gala Cabrera, Eugenia Bazán and led by Carolina Quiroga and Juan Manuel Alonso. Likewise, the classes had the contribution of renowned individuals and collectives from Argentina, Germany, México, Spain, The Netherlands, Uruguay and Portugal who shared their work in the multiple fields that cut across feminist architecture: historical research on women architects, feminist architectural practices, urban public policies with a gender perspective, queer architecture, feminist activism, among others. This diverse constellation of voices builds the ideology, convictions and feminist utopias of LINA.

It's organized into three thematic laboratories: Registers + Women Architects dedicated to making visible the work of women in urban planning and architecture, (De)Constructed Architecture(s) in housing and gender and (Inter)Sectional Landscapes focused on public space.

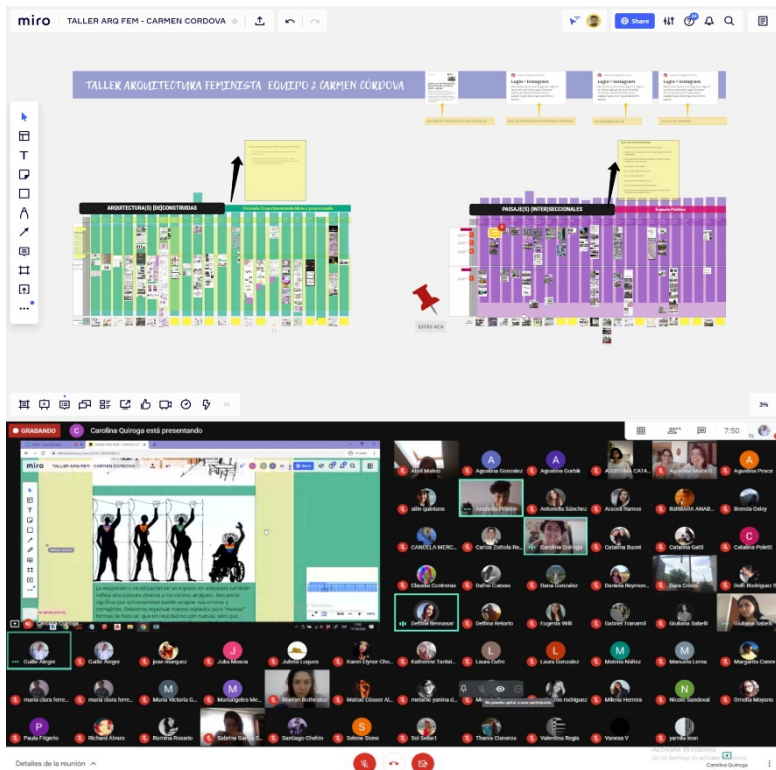


Fig. 2. Design studio as a platform for collective experimentation on feminist cities. Source: LINA Platform archive

The (Inter)Sectional Landscapes Laboratory proposes to research from a feminist approach the rehabilitation of collective landscapes. Its main goal is to explore from a gender perspective which concepts and strategies of redesign can achieve public spaces that truly represent and include all identities and social groups. The Argentinean feminist architect Ana Falú with her renowned trajectory as a teacher, researcher, activist and human rights defender is a great reference for LINA. As Falú pointed out:

We are interested in debating the question of public space, the public and the private as political dimensions. The city as a space to be experienced; the streets, squares, routes, meeting places, as places of recognition and dialogue between citizens and between the diversity of citizen identities, and between these and the state. A city where women take ownership of their rights and reclaim the streets, extending the discourse of recognition of rights to other excluded groups. [13]

Another important contribution of the course is the network built with Natalia Czytajlo and Paula Llomparte from the University of Tucumán, recognised specialists in the subject who lead the Observatory of Urban-Territorial Phenomena, the professional practices *Genders, city(s) and violence*, the elective course *Women, Gender and Habitat* and the *Gender and Urbanism and Environment and Landscape* laboratories. Or with Eva Álvarez and Carlos Gómez from the Polytechnic University of Valencia who share their experience on how to incorporate the gender perspective in urban planning and design. Among the guest lecturers, Zaida Muxi clarified concepts and explained her work on feminist urbanism, and the collective *The City that Resists* presented the importance of social participation in thinking about cities from a feminist perspective.

Each group of students selected a public space as a case study: squares, boulevards, parks, urban voids in marginal areas, block centers, mass housing estates and their own university campuses. First, the students re-mapped from a gender perspective the physical conditions - density, morphology, transport, care infrastructure- that produced imbalances in full use by the whole community. In most cases, profound conditions of symbolic and spatial discrimination were detected, even in recognized and preserved heritage sites.

During the first courses the context of COVID 19 prevented personal interviews with residents, information available on the internet - crime maps, statistics, reports - was used, and surveys were conducted through social media to gather people's opinions. After the pandemic, we guided the students to conduct some kind of experience - interview, survey, workshop - to learn about the needs of the community. Several teams have worked with groups of people, neighbourhood associations or NGOs working on gender-based violence. Although these were very brief activities, they have been fundamental for the students.

On this basis, concepts and operations were explored for re-use. One of the most important aspects of the proposals was to recover the political role of architecture. In this sense, some interventions included cultural itineraries to tell the story of the trans-

sexual community, spaces for LGBTQI+ marches or social assistance facilities for gender violence. It should be noted that in Latin America a woman dies every two hours as a victim of femicide.



Fig. 3. Reuse of public space with a gender perspective, Industrial site in Mendoza. Source: LINA platform archive

Democratization and equitable access to public space were other topics of project research. Although each case study had particular challenges, common themes emerged when defining rehabilitation strategies: safety (lighting, signage), accessibility, the creation of areas for all ages and genders, places for play that promote children's autonomy, among others. In addition to spaces for leisure, recreation and sport, the projects also combined productive landscapes such as urban allotments and community gardens. Especially in low-income areas, these places strengthen the social network and the popular economy.

3 Conclusion is inclusion

LINA Feminist Architecture Design Studio was born on the periphery of the university curriculum, without budget and physical space. From this almost marginal condition we were able to interrogate the system and create a truly unprecedented space for discussion and experimentation in design. We have achieved to establish the theme, to be recognised in different academic and professional spheres and to write a book that compiles the philosophy and results of the programme. [14] LINA was also a finalist in the Teaching Programmes category of the XII Ibero-American Biennial of Architecture and Urbanism "Inhabiting on the Margin". But our greatest success was the interest of the students.

Regarding the future of LINA, one of the main objectives is to strengthen the links with the diverse social actors. With regard to educational institutions, we are working on the accreditation of the course in more schools of architecture, expanding the current network comprising six Argentinean universities - Buenos Aires, Avellaneda, Cuyo, Tucumán, La Plata, San Juan - and the University of the Republic in Uruguay. The same applies to formalising agreements with various NGOs - neighborhood associations, professional networks - that participate in the programme.

Another significant part of the agenda is to deepen the participation of citizens and governmental agencies in the didactic strategies. To this purpose, a pilot programme of on-site brief workshops is being developed. This dynamic will allow students and teachers to work in direct contact with residents, community organisations and civil service representatives, as well as with professionals from different disciplines.

Is a Feminist Architecture design studio necessary? Probably not, because all the design studios should include a gender perspective in their pedagogical methods, contents and the composition of the teaching teams. Inclusion is not an optional matter in architecture. Therefore, these notes are not intended to convey a conclusion about an exemplary educational model, but rather to invite critical reflection on the subject. And to all those people, groups and institutions that have carried out similar actions to make their work visible and to create networks. We know that sooner or later the patriarchy will fall. But in the meantime, LINA Platform will continue from the margins betting that a more human, more poetic and more sensitive city is possible.

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