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HARC 0338: Gender and the Making of Space
November 11, 2014

College Campuses and the History of Co-education: A Continuation of Gendered Spaces

Places of higher learning are touted as centers of innovation where progressive ideals and movements in society are reflected and reinforced by its students. However, the origins of colleges and universities reveal a singular and prescribed vision based on the male-centered society that they were founded in. Though all colleges began with all-male student bodies, currently, there are only three non-religious colleges in the United States that solely enroll men.

Coeducation started to spread throughout educational institutions during the late 1960s and 1970s and subsequently, the number of college-enrolled female students quickly increased.¹ However, while the rise of co-education led to the dissolution of all-male colleges, many women's colleges, which were created to provide a space of higher learning where it was previously unavailable, still remain today as single-gendered, competitive institutions. While these colleges were created with the male college as a reference, its planning and architecture was centralized on the female experience and made in anticipation for their future prominence in society. The difference in design and organization of the women's college makes it a model that is impossible to recreate in these recently integrated college campuses. Co-educational colleges and universities with all-male origins are highly gendered spaces and still cater to the male experience through its architecture and organization.

Before colleges establish themselves intellectually, they assert their power and prominence over others through their planning. Following the theory of architectural determinism, which says architecture influences behavior, colleges organize themselves to direct

¹ Middlebury College Archives, Folder A 103

the movement of students and manage the relationships between them and the administration, the town, and themselves.² In comparison to women's colleges, men's spaces aren't as prescribed or pre-determined as their female counterparts. Because these spaces were only created with men in mind, this meant that building placement privileged certain departments or schools of thought rather than types of people. Though the beginning of coeducation at Middlebury would seem like a catalyst for more equitable teaching practices or progressive thought on the role of women in society, males still held the dominant position.

The luxury of being male in a college campus is especially visible in the creation of residential halls. Current layouts of residential halls are designed to provide the most utilitarian and functional way to house students. However, college dormitories were originally modeled off recreating the arrangement and function of a house and were set up similar to Victorian homes with well systems, a traditional staircase system which separated units into smaller ones.³ In Gonville and Caius College, male spaces emphasized having separate, private staircases in order to reinforce and build their character and help them establish individual lives (see Figure 1. Perse and Legge Buildings).⁴ They were allowed to socialize with their friends and move freely because privacy was considered an aspect of a healthy setting and society.⁵ The dormitory style that we are familiar with today of long hallways with rooms flanking both sides was considered "unsatisfactory and destructive of collegiate character" and only arose as an option after the beginning of women enrollment.⁶ Male dormitories are more flexible in their distribution and organization of space and show signs of higher class living in comparison simply by their allocation of space. Floorplans of these spaces (Figure 1) show large reception areas and a much

² Larson, 29 & 137

³ Bluestockings book bear wood diagram, pg. 10

⁴ Bear wood diagram 10

⁵ Vickery 11 and 13

⁶ Vickery 10

more comfortable style of living than what was allocated for female students. While these design decisions were reasoned out as a means to improved security, health and well-being, male and female residential space were not equitable in terms of experience or living standards.

Women's colleges were successful in making places that coincided with the conservative culture and attitude towards women while also attempting to challenge the pressures that they were under. Founders of colleges in both Europe and America had a difficult challenge of mediating between respecting the societal view and their personal opinions regarding female success and access. While the spaces created for them on men's campuses certainly reveal a prescribed plan for women, even spaces designed solely for females, reveal a "design and system of governance through their buildings and landscapes which provide a rich field of data about the way American women were perceived by men and the way they came to perceive themselves."⁷ In contrast, founders of European women's colleges were not trying to mirror their "male Oxbridge predecessors and were instead focused on a model that was architectural and social yet still preserved the domestic aspect of the space".⁸ Both models were trying to create space for women but approached it in two different ways.

European schools began to enroll women at the same time as their American counterparts but were focused more on improving the women rather than liberating them. Emily Davies, one of the leaders of educational change and women's rights in the late seventeenth century, founded a college for women in conjunction with Girton College due to its location.⁹ Though Davies agreed that education was important, she did not intend for it to take women out of the domestic realm but instead to improve their value and "social propriety".¹⁰ This struggle between

⁷ Lefkowitz Hroowitz (xxiv)

⁸ Vickery xii

⁹ Vickery 4, 6

¹⁰ 5

emphasizing the home while getting academic respect repeated itself throughout the whole advancement of women's education and only really resolved itself once other institutions like Newnham College created their own architectural language to show their power while still retaining some distance from male institutions.

American women's colleges were definitely questioned for their plan to liberate women especially since the 1920s was a time of tumult where the conceptions of womanhood were quickly changing.¹¹ The beginning plans for women's colleges were very limited in order to provide sufficient enough monitoring of women in these particular instances...

The development of college space also shows a strict gendering between the two. Athletic spaces like the gymnasium were prioritized in their construction plans since it would attract more males to the college, disregarding the shortage of residential space for its cramped female students.¹² In order to create the first intentional space for females, President John Martin Thomas had to barter with a donor who challenged him to raise the same amount of money in order to fund Pearsons Hall, the first all-girls dorm meant to accommodate the rising enrollment numbers.¹³ In contrast, the gymnasium was passed fairly quickly by the administration with no debate or dissent. Personal accounts from female students showed an apparent difference in experience and access to resources, but the creation of the gym was almost effortless, revealing a constant privileging of male space even during a time of progress.

¹¹ Lefkowitz xxv

¹² Stameshkin 240

¹³ Stameshkin 234

The mission of college planning was to reflect the college's plan for education and though some colleges started enrolling women in the late nineteenth century, colleges did not start making space for them until much later. ...

Though Middlebury College began to enroll women in the early 1970s, systems from its time as an all-male college still persist on today's experience of the campus. Colleges and universities that began as all-male institutions are today still highly gendered and catered to the male experience ...