

WIP: Work in Progress | Women in Practice

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What happens when independent women designers form a collective practice rooted in co-creation rather than singular authorship? How could feminist values inform and inspire a shared design approach? Which professional conventions should be unlearned in order to foster more mutually supportive spatial practices? The history of feminist practice in architecture offers more than a century of women-led collective initiatives. But their marginalization has prevented feminist values from being normalized in the profession and the built environment at large. Still today, women-led collaborative practices are considered novel.

WIP: Work In Progress | Women In Practice is feminist design collective composed of two entities: a supportive community of women design professionals and a collaborative practice shared between individual members. WIP is a work in progress, subject to adaptation by and for its participants. Within the shared practice, WIP Collaborative, team structure and work methods are adjusted to the needs of specific projects, including scope, community and stakeholders, and the interests of WIP members involved. To date WIP has completed a range of projects and events in the public realm that foreground embodied experiences, equity, access, and inclusivity, including public space installations, community focused design research, and collective happenings.

Learning from other feminist practices and workers cooperatives past and present, WIP Collaborative is democratically organized so that all participants contribute to its trajectory and creative process. WIP's projects reimagine public environments by challenging, expanding, and transforming their norms. They explore issues of embodiment – physical, sensory, and emotional experiences of the body – and create environments of choice that support the spatial and experiential preferences of a diverse population. By embracing a plurality of human needs and a co-creative design approach, WIP operates outside the norms of conventional design practice in pursuit of a more vibrant shared future.

For the practicing architect, the veneer of professionalism and strategies of management were sufficient tools to advance architectural practice, whereas language pertinent to contemporary feminist thought, including care ethics, reproductive labor, and transformative politics, were pragmatically absent.

—Jia Gu¹

Women's actions through the years demonstrate that they understand how the appropriation of space is a political act. Access to space is fundamentally related to social status and power. Changing the allocation of space can change society.

—Leslie Kanes Weisman²

Women and women's groups in architecture are not new.³ They have been here, appropriating the built environment to better serve its inhabitants—acknowledged, overlooked, mistreated, celebrated or not.⁴ Since the late 19th century, women-led collectives have independently organized and initiated spatial practices to foster equity in underserved communal environments. By posing alternative models of collaboration and community engagement, they also have presented feminist counternarratives to patriarchal characteristics of the built environment and its design.

Seen, heard, ignored, avoided or not—feminism is also not new in architecture. More than advocacy for gender equality in the field, feminist practices seek transformative alternatives to the typically inequitable and exclusive conventions of architecture that often serve only a narrow portion of the human population. Resisting the profession's preference for singular authorship, feminist practices embrace communality and co-creation. Prioritizing considerations for underserved groups, their work has emphasized the oppression of women and other marginalized identities in the built environment.

Despite the decades-long presence of feminism in architecture, the discipline struggles to embrace its values and influence in the mainstream discourse. Architecture prefers to celebrate

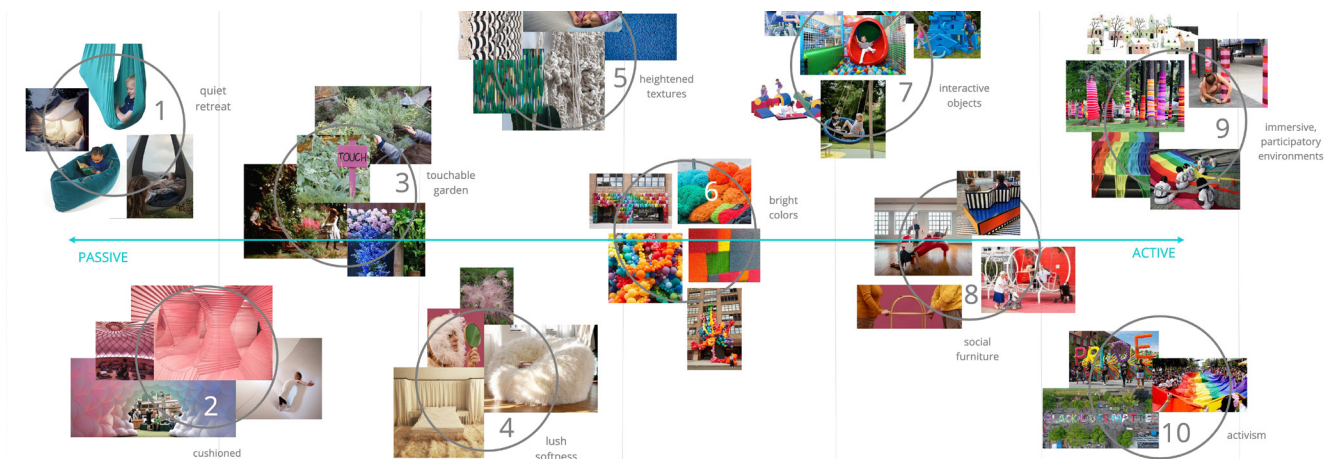


Figure 1. Visual experiential range chart use for neurodiversity research interviews. Image courtesy of WIP Collaborative.

its women practitioners as trailblazers, reinforcing their novelty instead of normalizing feminist approaches and interests. A glaring example of this today is the profession's silence on issues of reproductive justice in the months since the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*.⁵

Also disheartening is architecture's commitment to the absence of women. While they compose the majority of student populations and roughly half of early-career designers, women represent a significantly lower proportion of professional leaders, firm principals, and licensed architects.⁶ Contributing factors include the persistence of gender-based and sexual discrimination, poor architectural labor practices that disproportionately harm women, the inability to shake patriarchal hero architect narratives, and absence of pay equity.⁷ By clinging to a false neutrality, mainstream architectural discourse avoids feminist topics of care ethics, reproductive labor, and the political agency of spatial practice that would help to address those issues. Nothing is more characteristically patriarchal than ignoring the reality that personal experiences of freedom or oppression are based on the type of body an individual inhabits.⁸

Despite the rich history and lineage of feminist practice, contemporary women-led collectives continue to be received as if the discipline has not seen them before.⁹ This perpetual othering and refusal to normalize feminism within architecture reveals the entrenchment of not only structural gender inequity, but more broadly the culture of patriarchal individualism that persists in the discipline and its professional practice. How could this change? What could a more sustainable, shared future for collective practice look like? Has it always been here, ignored and overlooked?

COLLABORATIVE AND COMMUNITY

WIP: Work In Progress | Women In Practice is as it is named, a work in progress. A contemporary feminist design collective working to define new spatial narratives of communality

through its organizational structure as well as its projects. Its broader component, WIP Community, is a peer network of women in practice that was assembled in early 2020 as a space for sharing experience, knowledge, mentorship, and opportunities for collaboration. Within the Community, a smaller group formed WIP Collaborative, a shared multidisciplinary practice of independent design professionals who work together on projects to improve the public realm. The founding members of WIP Collaborative are Abigail Coover, Bryony Roberts, Elsa Ponce, Lindsay Harkema, Ryan Brooke Thomas, Sera Ghadaki, and Sonya Gimón.

Applying feminist principles to practice structure as well as the priorities of their work, WIP is pushing back against disciplinary norms. Democratically organized, WIP Collaborative members share its leadership and decision-making processes. In this co-creative atmosphere, design ideas lose the preciousness of a single author and are developed through an iterative process of collaboration. Achieving a level of comfort with many voices at the table also lends well to methods of community engagement that embrace input and participation from the end users a project aims to serve. In this way, advocacy for underrepresented needs can be amplified through a shared design process. This is not a novel concept—representation matters. Disenfranchised groups have organized in solidarity for centuries to enact change. But conventional design practices still tend to lean away from collectivity, preferring the efficiency of top-down hierarchy in decision making.

To date WIP has completed a range of projects including built installations in public space, community focused design research, and activist collective happenings. With an emphasis on intersectionality and inclusivity, WIP Collaborative's projects reimagine public environments by challenging, expanding, and transforming their norms. In pursuit of greater social justice, public health, and environmental wellbeing, WIP aims to adapt the public realm with consideration for individual preferences as well as the common interests of a broad population. WIP's

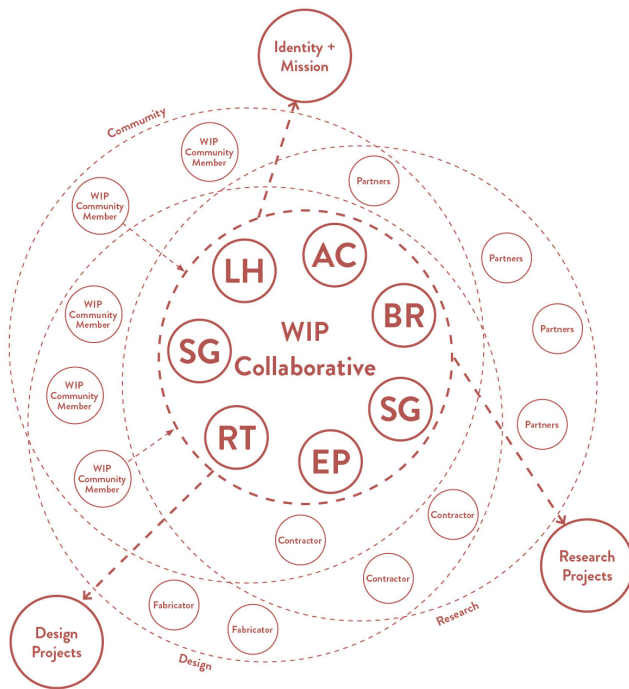


Figure 2. WIP Organizational chart.
Image courtesy of WIP Collaborative.

work celebrates this plurality of needs in pursuit of more equitable and diverse forms of collectivity.¹⁰

EARLY FEMINIST SPATIAL PRACTICES

The impact of women-led collaborative practices can be found in the histories of underserved public spaces and those who sought to improve them. Playgrounds were introduced into the urban contexts of American cities by women as interventions to address quality of life concerns for poor communities during the late 19th century. An early example was the creation of “sand gardens” by women-led organizations like the Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association (MEHA) for the children of working class communities in Boston.¹¹ Acting on the belief that structured environments for recreation would benefit the lives of children as well as improve the overall wellbeing of the working class, MEHA created the gardens as shared play spaces that were open to the community. At the time, women practitioners in planning and construction were “ignored by the male park builders who focused on grandiose urban parks or park systems designed with a bias toward passive recreation.”¹² By contrast, the active spaces of sand gardens and the eventual playgrounds they inspired were informal and human-centric, intentionally designed for stimulation, social interaction, and collective experiences.

In the early 20th century, women-led collaborative efforts to improve the conditions of poor neighborhoods were organized in settlement houses. In Chicago’s Hull House, notable

female activists Jane Addams, Alice Hamilton, Florence Kelley, and their colleagues worked together to observe and analyze the detrimental characteristics of public life in underserved communities. Through self-initiated practices of community engagement, they surveyed women in these communities in order to understand, identify and address their experiences related to environmental concerns such as waste management, infant mortality and public health, housing access, and dangerous labor conditions.¹³ The multifaceted nature of their work composed an intersectional agenda that remains core to environmental, labor, and social justice movements today.

WAYS OF KNOWING, WAYS OF CREATING

Feminist practices engage communities in order to learn from the lived experiences or “ways of knowing” of individuals within them.¹⁴ The concept of knowing refers to an individual’s understanding of their environment and their sense of connectedness to it.¹⁵ For those whose needs are not adequately supported in the environments they inhabit, their ways of knowing compose an expertise in enduring hostility and seeking opportunities for relief or refuge. These are the embodied experiences most critical to learn from in order to imagine more equitable shared futures.

Feminist ways of knowing are attentive to communal needs as well as to women’s experiences of hostility in spaces that were not designed to support them. In the US, most of the built environment has been constructed by white men without significant consideration for the needs of other people whose embodied experiences differ from their own.¹⁶ For individuals who are not white, able-bodied, cisgender and/or male, navigating streets and public spaces can be uncomfortable and unsafe especially when alone, and adequate facilities to care for bodily needs are lacking. Conventional design standards fail to accommodate their non-conforming bodies. Women’s experiences are also influenced by gendered associations with care labor and their various chosen and unchosen roles as primary child caregivers, homemakers, charitable volunteers, administrators, teachers, nurses, therapists, etc. As such, feminist ethics of care are characterized by the pursuit of inclusivity, valuing of everyday life, and openness to change.¹⁷

Feminist theory surfaced in mainstream architectural discourse in the 1970s and 80s and gained attention in the following decades through the work of prominent voices like Beatriz Colomina, Elizabeth Grosz, and Jennifer Bloomer.¹⁸ During this time, experimental feminist practices and collectives emerged in the US and Europe in open rejection of architecture’s patriarchal norms. In the late 1970s, the experimental Women’s School of Planning and Architecture (WSPA) was founded, financed, and run by women for women to counter the male-dominated disciplinary conventions of architectural education and practice. WSPA hosted a series of collaborative hands-on building workshops for women in cities across the US with the intention to empower women as leaders in architecture



Figure 3. Aerial image of Restorative Ground, 2021. Image courtesy of Hudson Square Properties and WIP Collaborative.

through shared knowledge and skills-building exercises as well as by establishing co-creative design processes. Co-founder Leslie Kanes Weissman described WSPA as a forum in which participants “could learn from each other—all of us teachers and students, exchanging questions, challenging convention, inventing new areas of inquiry and research, and sharing knowledge in a supportive atmosphere where women’s accomplishments would be visible, their skills respected, and their differences valued.”¹⁹

In the 1980s, another women-led collective practice called Matrix assembled a women’s co-operative design organization in London. In addition to a shared practice that focused on design projects that served women, children, and communities, members of Matrix also collectively authored a 1984 book entitled *Making Space: Women and the Man-Made Environment*. The book revealed extensive sexism in the built environment by presenting the lived experiences of women and the inequality they encountered at all scales of public and private spaces. It also critiqued conventional design practices for their failure to address the diverse range of needs of the users of their buildings. “[Male architects] have not considered whether different sections of the population have different environmental needs...Women’s voices are not heard during this decision-making process which is supposed

to ensure that building development takes place in a socially responsible way.”²⁰ Making Space outlined a crisis of architecture that extended from the profession’s internal patriarchy to the failure of the built environments it created to meet the needs of the individuals who occupy them. “We believe that the question of what has ‘gone wrong’ with modern architecture can not be discussed adequately without an awareness of the invisibility of women’s lives to the professionals who plan buildings and cities.”²¹

FEMINISM AND LABOR

Feminism and labor movements share a desire to replace systems of inequality with new collective models. Workers’ rights groups advocate for equitable labor conditions, from fair compensation to nonhierarchical management to bodily health, safety and wellbeing. Architecture’s poor labor practices are deeply entrenched—ubiquitous overwork and underpay, disregard for work-life balance and emotional wellbeing, and the lack of support for pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting that disproportionately harms women.²² Competitive business models for acquiring projects reinforce these practices. Advocating for the cooperativization of small firms to escape “discipline-defeating competition”, Peggy Deamer blames “the neoliberal directive to compete at all costs, to be proud of one’s “entrepreneurialism,” to be comfortable with an every-firm-for-itself approach,

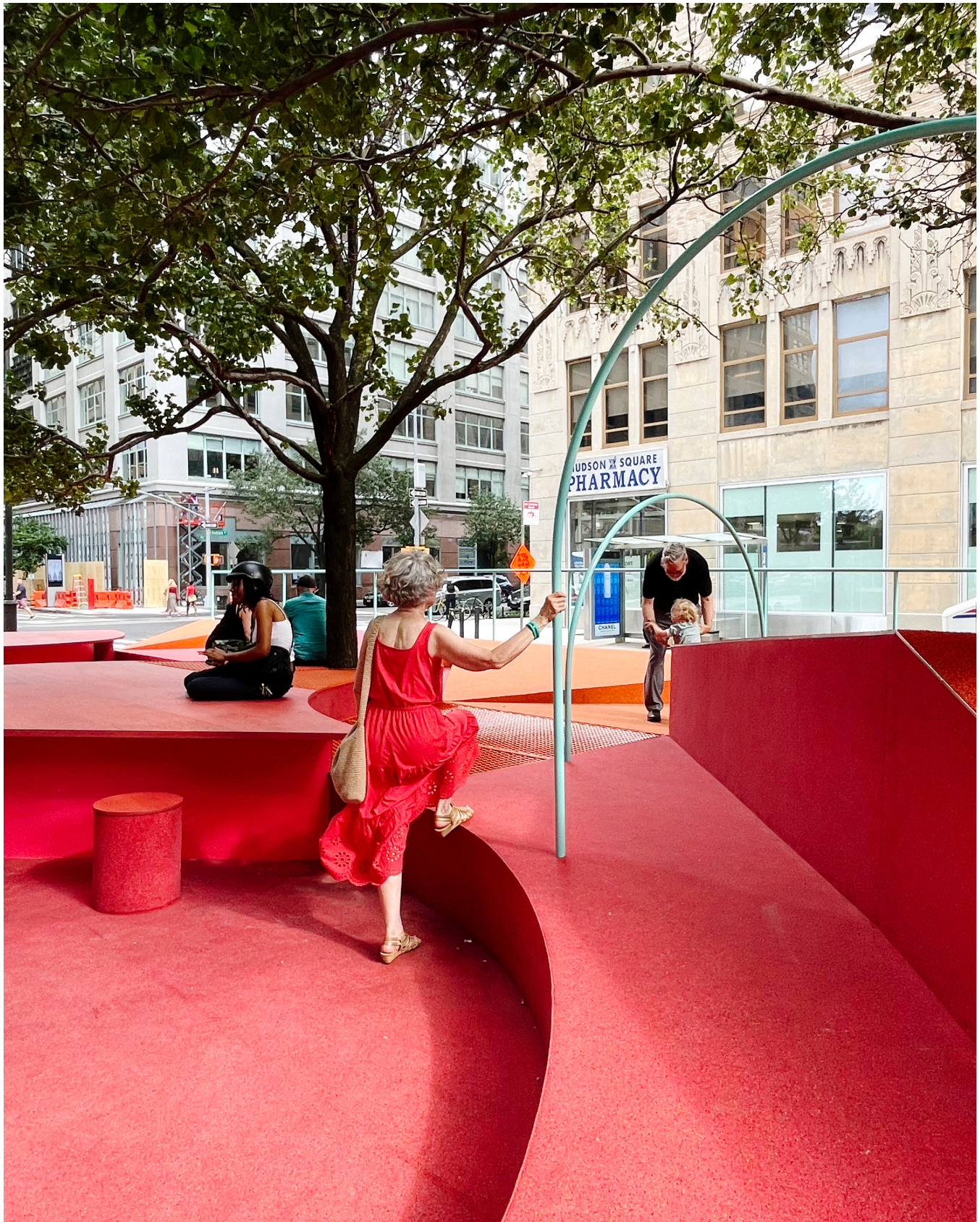


Figure 4. Visitors of all ages at Restorative Ground, 2021. Image courtesy of WIP Collaborative.

and to be absorbed with we-don't-have-the-time-or-money-to-deal-with-workplace-inequality thoughts."²³

Inspired by worker-owned cooperatives, WIP Collaborative is democratically organized and operated such that members participate in the decision-making processes that inform its mission and identity, as well as in determining individual responsibilities toward shared projects and endeavors that support their needs as well as collective goals. A future cooperative version of WIP could operate as a network cooperative through which members' independent practices could share overhead costs, administrative labor and services, collaborative projects, and employees in addition to their collaborative work.

At its core, WIP is an experiment in shared space, both within its professional practice and the environments it transforms. A focus on equity and inclusion are evident in three modes of WIP's collective practice: the design of commons, co-creative design research, and shared community happenings.

DESIGN OF COMMONS

Equity in shared space begins with access. In theory public spaces should be open and available to everyone, but more often they are the stages on which systemic inequality is laid bare. Typical public spaces retain physical, social, cultural, and political characteristics that are unwelcoming or exclusive to various persons including those with physical or intellectual disabilities, sensory sensitivity, people of color, women and children, LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming individuals, the elderly, unhoused, and more. Spatial considerations for the embodied experiences of these groups are necessary in order for the public realm to become a truly accessible shared commons in which the range of needs of its inhabitants are met.

While disability justice movements have made substantial progress in normalizing physical accessibility for wheelchair users and individuals with limited mobility, the increasing standardization of public space design further entrenches the exclusion of marginalized groups specifically because of their different spatial sensitivities and comfort levels.²⁴ Shared spaces that are over or understimulating, feel heavily surveilled or unsafe, lack spatial variety and opportunities for refuge, or reinforce class-based inequity by feeling too corporate or commercialized are inaccessible to many people simply because of their experiential qualities.

Recently built public works by WIP Collaborative were designed to provide experiential range and transform generic public sites into vibrant commons for engagement, spatial diversity, and social connection. These include installations that reimagined a streetscape (Restorative Ground, 2021) and plaza (Tidal Shift, 2022) as inclusive shared environments that invite a spectrum of active and passive behavior. These projects resist the conventional one-size-fits-all approach to public space by inserting human-scale architectures that are formally specific

yet non-prescriptive of how they are used. Designed to support and celebrate a range of human bodies, activities, preferences, and abilities, the installations fostered equity through spatial diversity, and collectivity through a focus on individual needs.²⁵

Built in 2021, Restorative Ground was the winning proposal for a design competition that called for spatial interventions to welcome the local community of residents, office workers, school-aged groups, and transient populations back to public space in the Hudson Square neighborhood of Lower Manhattan after the isolation of quarantine. Situated at the juncture of the street parking lane and sidewalk, the footprint allocated for temporary outdoor dining structures during the pandemic, Restorative Ground claimed a new public space. Designed as a landscape of choice, the dynamically shaped, multi-toned installation offered a range of spatial qualities with areas for focus, play, and relaxation with hard and soft elements, high and low stimulation, and various material textures. As an immersively inclusive public space, the installation appealed to a diversity of individual preferences.²⁶

In 2022, WIP's Tidal Shift was a commissioned installation on the outdoor public plaza of the Shed, a cultural institution in the center of Hudson Yards. Like many unactivated public spaces in its commercialized vicinity, the empty plaza was underutilized despite its adjacency to the popular and well-used High Line. Tidal Shift inserted a family of sculptural elements for sitting, lounging, dancing, performing, playing, and gathering designed to support a program of music and dance performances as well as everyday public use. In contrast to surrounding monumental towers, Tidal Shift's low, inclined planes and stepped surfaces supported the scale of human bodies, inviting play, rest, dance, and social connection through formal and informal uses. Painted in shades of green with material accents of blue-green recycled rubber, the shifting platforms were suggestive of aquatic movement and a visual expression of solidarity with the "Green Wave" of pro-abortion, feminist activism that has gained global momentum from its origin in Latin America. Through color, form, and site response, the project called for a "tidal shift" in the liberation and care for diverse embodied experiences.

CO-CREATIVE DESIGN RESEARCH

Restorative Ground and Tidal Shift were informed by WIP Collaborative's ongoing research about design for a neurodiverse public. Neurodiversity refers to the normal variation of neurological differences in the human population that cause individuals to experience the world around them in unique ways. These differences include diagnosed conditions such as autism and ADHD, as well as the cognitive and emotional effects of trauma, depression, and anxiety, that can contribute to a person's sensitivity to various environmental qualities and struggle to feel comfortable in shared public spaces.

WIP's co-creative research process is informed by interviews with neurodiverse experts, self-advocates, and allies including occupational therapists, family members of children with intellectual disabilities, and individuals with autism. Interviewees are asked to respond to image collages assembled by WIP to suggest various spatial conditions distinguished by their form, texture, level of activity, feeling of intimacy, and other aesthetic qualities. Responding intuitively, interviewees express their preferences, as well as descriptions of their lived experiences that influence those choices. No two sets of individual preferences are the same, underscoring the need for experiential range in shared spaces. Access to contrasting environmental conditions is necessary to support an individual experiencing rapid changes in their sensory processing. A person experiencing sensory overload might benefit from access to a calmer, protected space for escape, whereas someone else might seek stimulation in a vibrant, active space.

This research is ongoing, to be continued in a multi-year phased research and co-creative design initiative in collaboration with another women-led practice, Verona Carpenter Architects, the Design Trust for Public Space, partnering advocacy organizations that support neurodiverse communities, and an expert self-advocate advisory board. Working directly with members of these communities, the team will analyze existing public spaces to identify their shortcomings and opportunities for improvements to better support the full range of human neurodiversity. The findings will inform the design and construction of spatial prototypes to make these public spaces more sensory friendly and dynamic, and ultimately shape new design guidelines and public space policy to better support the greatest range of physical, emotional, and neurological differences in the public realm.

COMMUNITY HAPPENINGS

The idea for a supportive professional group that became WIP Community developed through conversations between multiple women in the process of founding and leading young, independent design studios. As individuals they were drawn to self-initiated design practice, but also craved connection to a community. There was a common interest in forming a mutually supportive network through which they could exchange advice, resources, ideas, and experience. Rather than seeing each other as competitors, they wanted to form relationships with other women in practice. In an industry that tends to pit individuals against each other, WIP Community aims to foster a professional environment in which participants rise together.

For WIP, professional is political and personal. Founded on feminist principles, WIP supports those who eschew patriarchal conventions and offer alternative narratives of practice. As a community, individuals can learn from and support each other through various modes of gathering, exchange, and activism. In early 2020, WIP Community's first collective event brought together a group of those women for informal gathering and



Figure 5. "Bodies of Womxn" by WIP Community, 2022. Image courtesy of Ilana Kohn and WIP Collaborative.

discussion of its potential. Soon after, a series of Practice Shares held over Zoom became opportunities to hear from and celebrate individual voices, as well as to connect with others amidst the pandemic. Despite the sometimes impersonal nature of virtual gathering, these events became intimate forums for learning from each other and exchanging ideas and inspiration. Hearing about the individual experiences and practices of other members strengthened the group's connection.

WIP Community events have also become forums for political expression and activism. In May 2022, in anticipation of the Supreme Court decision that would overturn *Roe v. Wade*, WIP Community hosted its first collective happening, a shared making event entitled "Bodies of Womxn". In response to the threats against womxn's bodies, reproductive rights, abortion and sexual healthcare, members of the WIP Community gathered in a shared act of empowerment in public space. Each individual transformed a paper hospital from a readymade garment associated with vulnerability into an individual expression of strength. Using green paint and various stitching, folding, and wrapping techniques gleaned from practices of garment making and care, the making process involved individuals working alongside each other and exchanging ideas along the way. As the culminating act, community members wore their gowns and stood together on the park's monumental stair in solidarity.

A COLLECTIVE OF INDIVIDUALS

In the first three years of its existence, WIP has established a strong collective identity through its transformative built projects in the public realm, co-creative practices, and intentional communality. Seen in the context of the history of feminist practices, it is striking how consistent the interests,

approaches, and methodologies of WIP are with other women-led collectives that have come before. Despite the critical need for this work, is the resistance to feminism in architecture so great that its initiatives might be held in a recursive cycle of the same actions from generation to generation? What, if anything, is new here if all women-led practices in the patriarchy are perpetually novel? Is WIP making any progress?

To find out, it was appropriate to apply the same techniques of engagement proven by feminist practices to effectively understand a community through the individual experiences. WIP Collaborative's founding members were asked to reflect on WIP as a feminist practice and the relationship between the collective and their independent practices. Their responses revealed an important characteristic that is already underscored in their work: communities are strengthened by their members' individuality rather than conformity. The multiplicity of perspectives, experiences, needs, preferences, interests, and knowledge within a collective of individuals contributes to a more robust shared identity.

"WIP provides an opportunity to shape [our work] as we see fit rather than conforming to standard practices. This allows us to merge otherwise isolated areas of life such as activism, innovative research interests and design practice." -Sonya Gimon

"Being able to work on cross disciplinary projects together through WIP while combining expertise and learning from each other has expanded how I approach my independent work and practice. I've been able to apply ideas I have developed or wanted to implement in my independent practice through larger scale collaborative projects with WIP." -Sera Ghadaki

"We create together and share practical information, professional and emotional support, strengthening WIP and our independent practices in parallel. WIP is a practice and a network that exposes me to ideas and opportunities that I wouldn't have otherwise. Having co-created and completed two public projects with WIP is a meaningful milestone that continues to inspire my independent practice, which is currently engaging with communities and exploring the concept of commonality." -Elsa Ponce

As architecture clings to its established patriarchal tendencies toward singular authorship, top-down hierarchy, and one-size-fits-all approaches, it will continue to face the limitations of its own exclusivity and narrowness. Feminist approaches offer ways of expanding spatial practices to encompass the considerations, attitudes, and experiences it has previously avoided. Until they are normalized within architecture, feminist practices will continue to be novel, to build on the foundations laid by their mothers and sisters, and to be a work in progress.

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