SUSTAINABLE DESIGN:

WITHIN REACH?

Perspectives | In Favor of the Fringe
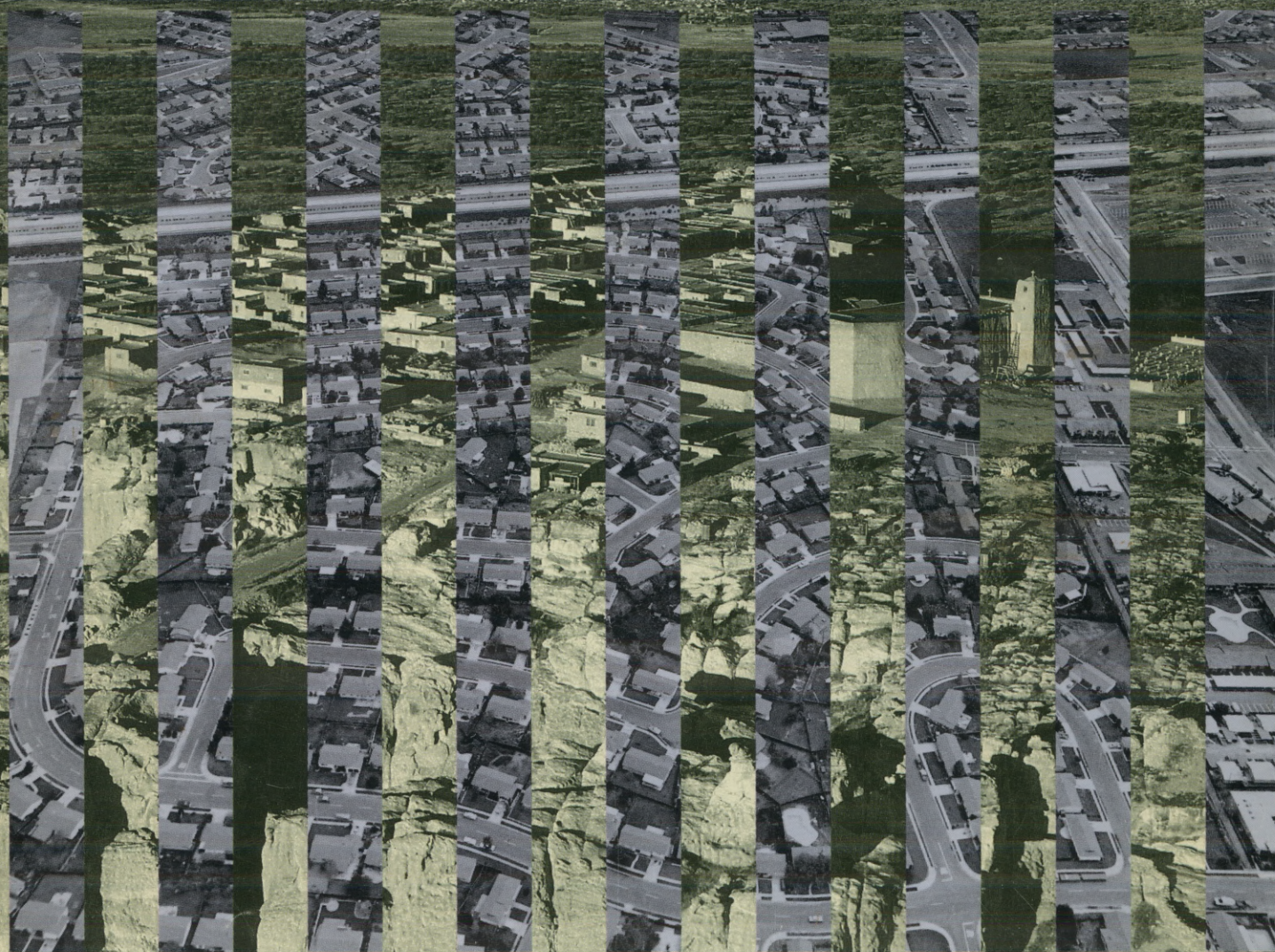
In assessing flawed feminist strategies of the last two decades, **Margaret Crawford** identifies the margin of the profession as its new frontier.

Even in its limited engagement with architecture, feminism has never been a static concept. During the 1970s two distinct feminist strategies emerged to address the key issues of women's marginal status in the profession, and their failure to forge female architectural identities within it. One group of feminists focused on eliminating discrimination. Attempting to change architecture from the inside, women joined professional organizations and argued for parity of opportunity, position, and pay. Although they achieved some successes, particularly in legal and institutional terms, the prestigious inner circle of architecture remained the men's club that it had always been.

More radical feminists attacked from the opposite position, asserting that women are completely different from men. Assuming that a fundamental female identity existed, they began to set up alternative institutions, separated from the manifestly patriarchal structures of architecture. These ranged from women's networks to the identification of female principles of design. And though they were successful in supporting women's endeavors, their self-elected outsider status effectively cut them off from most architectural activity, which remained firmly in the hands of male architects or of building trades that, if anything, were even more sexist than architecture. By employing oversimplified assumptions about men and women, both groups implicitly accepted the existing male discourse of architecture. If one group adopted the prevailing male values without question, the other imposed a universal female identity as confining and reductive as the male identity it challenged. Yet similar strategies have had far more success in opening up other fields to women. This suggests that the architectural profession's continuing exclusion of women is linked to conditions specific to the profession.

At the very moment women began to present themselves in large numbers, American architecture was in crisis. The erosion of Modernist architecture had revealed the profession's weaknesses without offering solutions. The absence of a broad social base, and the lack of control over the materials and techniques of building severely limited the profession's power over architectural production. Abandoning the broad ambitions of Modernism, architects acknowledged their limits and retreated into formalism.

The frustration caused by these conditions was offset by the increasingly important role that architectural theory played in creating compensatory myths. In spite of their challenges to Modernist assumptions, architectural versions of post-structuralist theory rarely challenged the deeply embedded fictions of architectural authorship. Now dressed in Post-Modernist garb, the male figure of Howard Roark continued to embody the dominant architectural identity, a role that could rarely be assumed by women. At the same time, a somewhat different interest in history and theory produced a new generation of feminist scholars, who began to challenge the invisible paradigms that structure architecture and society in ways that marginalize women. Feminist studies flourished, producing significant works exposing the biases of the "man-made" environment and extending their critical methods to address other marginalized groups. However, with the exception of a few pioneering works in the 1970s, this endeavor focused primarily on women as users, rather than creators of architecture.

In the late 1980s another feminism appeared, with theorists who added gender analysis to the growing list of post-structuralist approaches to architecture. Although their active dismantling of architecture's master narratives seemed to open up possibilities for new feminist identities without the essentialism of earlier feminisms, these critical practices actually erected new barriers. Safely sheltered in academic settings, these writers practiced criticism as a self-justifying end, using language and concepts inaccessible to most architects. Their discourse in effect dismisses or silences other women, including feminists, who do not speak the same dense and difficult language – a form of elitism exacerbated by the choice not to address the practice of architecture. Furthermore, since this feminist criticism's engagement with architecture is primarily formal and philosophical, it easily becomes apolitical, detached from the specific mechanisms of power and exclusion that maintain women's marginality. Unlike the previous feminisms, it is neither inside nor outside, but hovers somewhere above the profession.

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The African-American feminist bell hooks (her preferred style) proposes an alternative strategy. Restructuring the persistent issues of marginality and identity, she rejects "imposed" marginality by redefining an edge condition as "a space of radical openness." This does not imply resignation to marginality, but a proactive reversal of its meaning, turning it into a source of creativity – a cutting edge. If freely chosen, marginal positions can become sites of freedom and resistance. While maintaining a critical relationship to the dominant center, this framework can accommodate critical inquiry and practice.

If deconstruction's importance has been in breaking down universalizing structures, intentional marginality offers the possibility of reconstruction, only now in decentered terms. In many ways, hooks's strategy identifies and politicizes a site that many women in architecture are already occupying through their choice of non-traditional roles. The pursuit of new groups of clients and new modes of practice suggests the possibility of radically different architectural identities. Thus, those on the fringes of architecture might also begin to imagine its transformation. **Margaret Crawford** ■

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