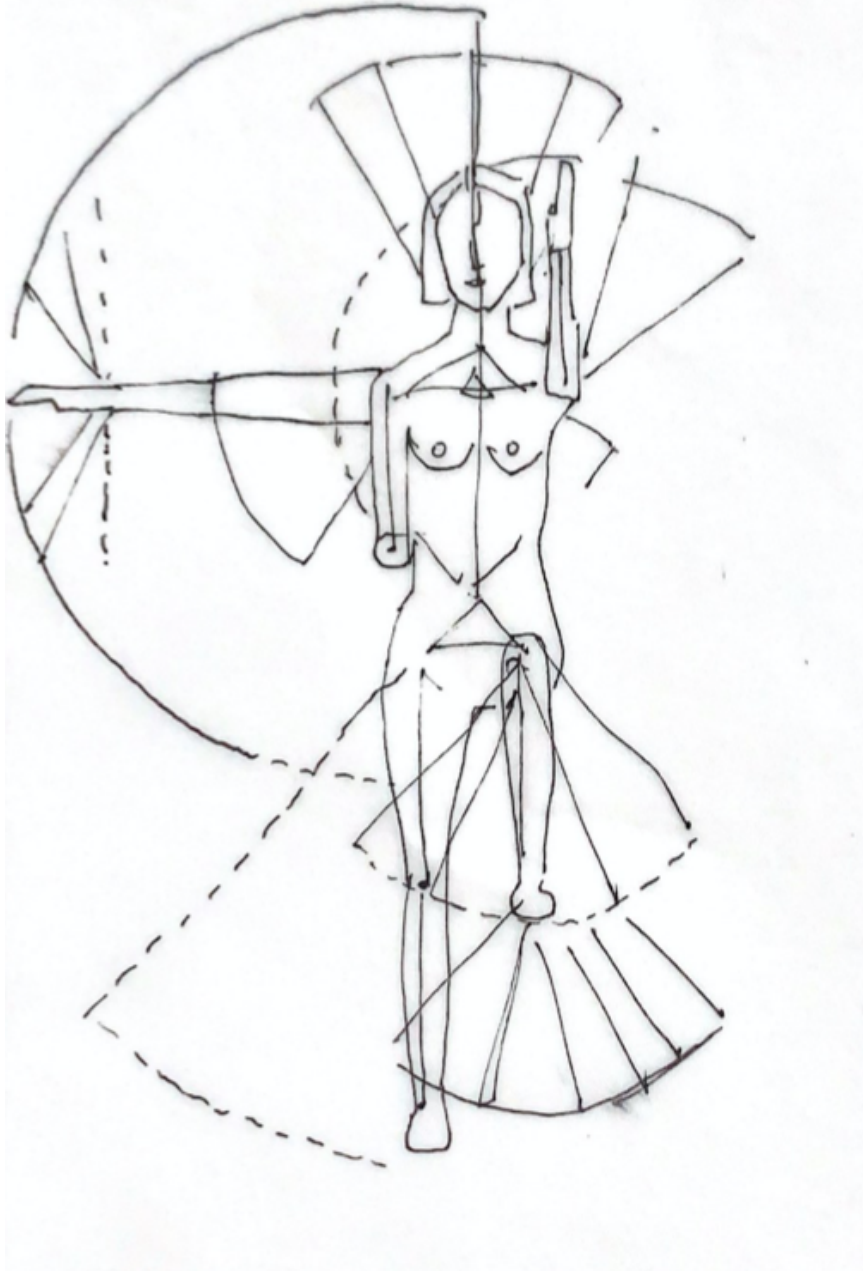


Women in Architecture: Architecture in Women

Underappreciated or unknown. An essay explaining why we should draw from feminine-inspired architecture to create spaces of equality.



Sketch of the 'average' western woman depicted in *The Measure of Man and Woman*.

Women in Architecture: Architecture in Women

Introduction

You will probably never have heard of it. Which is one of the reasons I have chosen to discuss the Jagonari Women's centre in Whitechapel. A building that remains relatively unknown and unappreciated as a monument for feminine-inspired architecture. In this essay I will attempt to explain why this building deserves our attention, and what we can learn from how this project was conceived and delivered. And indeed, reflect on: where is it now?

The centre is particularly rare because it was commissioned by an underrepresented group of Bangladeshi women from London's East Asian community. They were looking to create a safe space for women, sympathetic to the physical settings and layouts that women prefer. The building was co-created with Matrix, a pioneering collective of female architects championing a feminist approach to the built environment. The women specifically chose Matrix as project partners, operating at the time when there was practically no concern for the needs or voices of women in the built environment. Thereby cementing an 'all-women' approach to the build. Furthermore, I am going to investigate the aesthetic unification of local British building styles and East Asian architecture. Aside from appearance, I will explore how the details of the internal space facilitate the specific needs of an overlooked minority keen to re-create the familiarity of home space from their Bangladeshi roots.

I hope to re-evaluate the significance of this building project in the context of the socio-economic backdrop of second wave feminism in 1980s Britain and its meaning today. I also examine the process of co-creation between client and architect, and the lessons learned forty years on, as women remain largely invisible or ignored in the creation of the built environment. The vision of the Jagonari Centre goes far beyond its practical purpose and place, and speaks to the gender inequality issues that persist to the present day. But even beyond gender, this building raises the profile of the value of inclusivity for all under-represented groups in society.



Figure 1 : Children playing in the courtyard



Figure 2 : Children's activities and classes

Facts

The Jagonari Women's Centre was conceived in 1982 and completed in 1987 by Matrix Feminist Design Co-Operative in response to a group of Bangladeshi women looking to tackle the growing concerns for their lack of safety and facilities in the area. One of the Centre's main aims was to openly embrace multifaceted female identities, and so, although conceived by a group of women from a particular cultural

background, the centre was purposely planned as a secular space, open to all¹. Its name was taken from the poem 'Jago Nari Jago Banhishikha' by Nazrul Islam, meaning 'Women Awake', or 'Rise Up, Women'.

In the historical context of the 1980's, the UK was still embroiled in a hostile socio-political climate that had arisen from immigration trends in the mid-1970s onwards, and racial discrimination was something many British Asians faced. A large community lived in London's East End.² High levels of race-related attacks, unemployment and deprivation caused great struggle and unrest for these communities throughout the late 20th century. However, the racially motivated murder of Altab Ali Baig in 1978 sparked the mobilisation and political organisation of Asian groups that worked to combat these issues. At the same time the Women's Liberation Movement was bringing women to the forefront of decision making. Matrix were operating at a time when less than 7% of women were licensed architects in the UK³. This group were making waves and in 1982 Greater London Council's Women's Committee was formed⁴ and worked on creating publications in collaboration with Matrix such as 'Building for childcare: making better buildings for the under-5s'⁵. Furthermore, in a 1983 article from Building Design it stated that the GLC had granted Matrix £33,150⁶ to help cover salaries and expenses to support the collective and level the playing field in the male dominated architectural world. The combination of these events led to the creation of spaces like The Jagonari Centre. Although it was built from necessity, the design has demonstrated a longevity of

¹Gallio, Fran, 'Jago Nari, Jago Banhishikha': A short history of The Jagonari Centre in Whitechapel, East End Women's Museum

²Ullah, Ansar Ahmed, and John Eversley. 2010. *Bengalis in London's East End*

³ 'Matrix: A Radical Approach To Architecture'. *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*. 9 (2): 158-168.

⁴ 'Timeline of the Women's Liberation Movement', The British Library n.d.

⁵ Matrix 1986. 'Building for childcare: making better buildings for the under-5s'. London: Matrix.

⁶"GLC Backs Feminist Architects." 1983. *Building Design*

purpose so that the building not only accommodated the immediate and specific needs of Asian women living in the area but encourage a sense of community and social justice.

The project was originally intended to be contained to the size of a portacabin - as suggested by the GLC – in the grounds of a disused school the council owned. However, Matrix were adamant that the project should not be undertaken as a “make do” project marginalised in a small site, and Matrix persuaded the women’s group they should take agency over the entire space and build something far more ambitious and statement-making. So instead, plans were drawn up to repurpose the semi-derelict school and create a four-storey building with a central courtyard and crèche at the back, all of which respectfully gave women the space, safety and facilities they wanted in 700m². This was a pioneering example of women creatively thinking about the spaces that have historically been designed without their voices in mind. Standing up for the importance of the build project in itself was a pioneering example of women ‘rising up’. Matrix challenged the women’s expectations of themselves and successfully secured over £600,000 in funding for the Jagonari centre. *“Women always make do with spaces, women have traditionally made do with spaces that don’t necessarily suit them. Women are immensely adaptable they can manage in all sorts of situations. But why shouldn’t they for a change have a centre that is made for them”*⁷ - Anne Thorne

Description

The building is constructed from London brick and incorporates South Asian architecture into its functional and aesthetic features. The four-story façade on

⁷ Boys, Jos 'Matrix Architects - Jagonari Centre Hackney 1980s' *YouTube* video

Whitechapel Road is subtly decorated with traditional south Asian patterns that feature in the narrow timber painted windows, turquoise window grilles and, recessed brick work. The window grilles feature geometric squares, lines and, diamonds that all allude to the mosques and temples and other civic buildings that can be found in the vast region of South Asia. The front entrance is centrally placed and surrounded by a thick border of colourful mosaic that depict various abstracted patterns. The front door is arched and small which was a design decision made for safety and privacy. While all the varying religions or cultures can find familiarity in the patterns there is a purposeful secular style which signifies the space is for all. Upon entering, the ground floor features an enclosed courtyard between the main centre and the crèche. This created a space for reassurance as mothers could watch over their children while attending workshops in the main building. Matrix intended for visiting women “to be able to see the children... but didn’t want to be able to hear them or let the children see them.”⁸ This design construct acknowledges the fact that women remain(ed) disadvantaged in the labour market due to working in part-time, or low-paid employment whilst still carrying the burden of unpaid care responsibilities for their children as well as other family members.

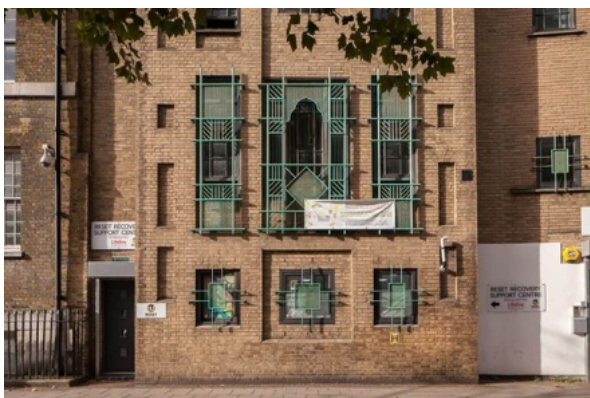


Figure 3 : The Jagonari Women's centre front

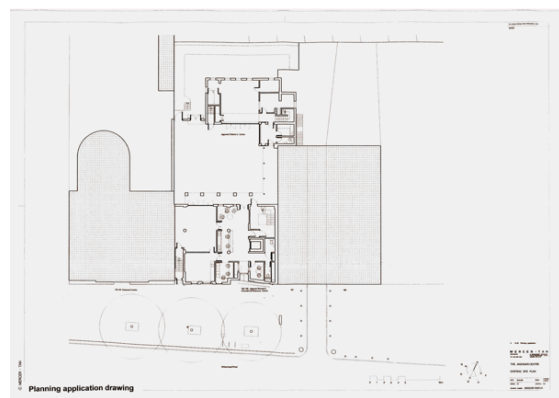


Figure 4 : plan of the first floor

⁸ "Matrix and After: Ways of working around feminism and architecture" *YouTube* video, Jan 8, 2020

Commentary

The building design of the Jagonari Women's centre was a constantly open dialog between the architects (Matrix) and the users (local Asian women). The conversations between these two groups were fascinating to explore as Matrix reshaped the power dynamic between the architect and client who with an imbalance of expertise often leads to insensitive design decisions. The self-awareness of all involved led to one of the most successful social project buildings in London that had an immense effect on the hundreds of families that passed its doors over the years. Ultimately it was the choice to actively involve the Jagonari women which led to a building that could sustain them for decades to come. For example, Matrix created models that could be disassembled and rearranged so that women with no architectural background could physically imagine and reinterpret the space.

At first, there was a cultural disconnect between the architects and the women's group that was identified in the design of the building's façade. Matrix originally designed patterns for the window grilles to include symbols of elephants. This Eurocentric view of Asia did not line up with the Bangladeshi women who identified the elephant as a symbol of Hindu culture. Yet, due to the open dialogue between the two groups, the design was resolved to be more appropriate, ensuring the spirit of inclusivity envisioned by the women.⁹

The internal layout was heavily influenced by the services the centre would be providing which included childcare, training, support for victims of domestic violence

⁹ "Reimagining Spaces with Matrix Feminist Design Co-Operative" 2021

and language skills. It was important that the layout would be syncretistic and reflect a comfortable space from women of all backgrounds and experiences. A key discussion was surrounding the use of colour in the building's fabric and internal design, due to the diversity of cultural and personal preference discussions about the meanings of colour from person to person. In compromise each floor had a different colour scheme that expresses the varying preferences of the design group yet as a result this also allowed for women with low English reading skills to be able to navigate the space easily. This design decision was heavily linked to one of the Centres main purposes with was to combat domestic abuse. In an interview with the Guardian the Jagonari's director Nurjahan Khatun acknowledged that "if you have no English [...] that makes you more vulnerable"¹⁰. Making the space more inviting and navigable was also aided by the fact Matrix invited women to bring in personal architectural references which resonated with life in their home nations. There was also a large emphasis on the importance of traditional Asian facilities that related to practises and habits that are not common to Europe. The fully accessible WC's on each floor were also fitted out with an Asian style squat toilet and taps/showers for traditional washing methods. The kitchens incorporated ground level sinks for women more accustomed to cooking on the floor.¹¹

Once the designs were submitted to the council, the GLC Historic Buildings department stated that they thought the design was too 'Asian' as it is situated in the Whitechapel conservation area.¹² While racial prejudices were both obvious on the streets and in institutional attitudes, the Jagonari group become confident in their

¹⁰ "The Mosque Combating Domestic Abuse" 2012

¹¹ "Jagonari Asian Women's Education Centre, Whitechapel, London – the Twentieth Century Society" n.d.

¹² "Whitechapel High Street Conservation Area Character Appraisals and Management Guidelines Whitechapel High Street Conservation Area" n.d.

own racial identities through the journey of the building's design. While the building remains subtle in design it also doesn't hide between the traditional Victorian fronts on either side. *"Initially Jagonari wanted the building to be low key. Through their participation in the design process ... they felt more comfortable in moving towards a more emphatic statement."*¹³

It is easy to feel that architecture can be very removed from the people you are designing for, especially at a teaching level. From researching this project, I have come to see how essential it is that buildings evolve and embrace the lives of the intended occupants. This integration of the client: architect thought process should begin even before sketches are made. For all of Matrix's projects it has been the relationships and discussions between architect and client that have driven the design, as opposed to the architects' personal styles, influences or ideas in isolation from the core purpose and needs of the client.

In Matrix's most famous paper called 'Making Space: Women and the Man Made Environment', Jane Darke argued that "architects are out of touch with those who use their buildings, and that their professional training is part of the process that removes them from many of the people they design for."¹⁴ Despite this statement being written in 1984, I feel that it is often still true today in the teaching styles and project briefs architecture schools give students today. Perhaps I am speaking from an early stage in my course at The Bartlett, but there has so far been relatively little emphasis on understanding people, the social needs of the elderly, disabled or

¹³ Grote, Janie. 1992. "Matrix: A Radical Approach to Architecture" *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*. 9 (2): 158-168.

¹⁴ Matrix (Organization). 2022. *Making space: women and the man-made environment*.

children or women. Despite the Jagaonari Centre being built before building regulations mandated disability access, Matrix's ethos demanded that a space of equality for women meant caring for the spectrum of women that would be needing access to the centre, so a lift was installed. In architectural practice, I feel there is a generally accepted 'universal system of proportions' which come from Le Corbusier's Modular Man. There is nothing universal about a 6-foot broad shouldered male, yet these images still set standards in popular design manuals today. It is now up to architecture schools, and their students who are the architects of our future built world, to make designing beyond a 'one size fits all' approach and to actively engage with the principles and values of a truly inclusive society. We need to constantly step-back and challenge our beliefs and assumptions when constructing a built environment. Female architects could see themselves as a design collective to promote the feminine perspective in that we see that more types of people are catered for. Rather than assume or wait for someone else to lead the way.

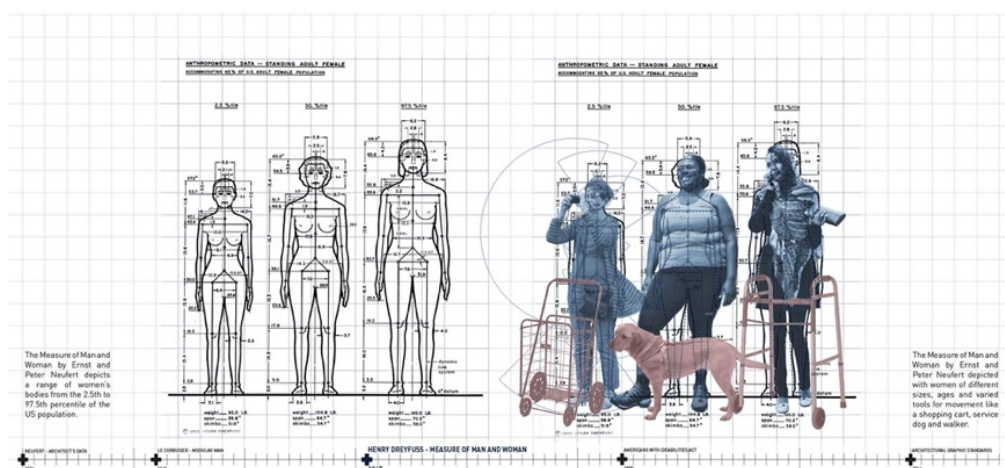


Figure 5 : Marina Santos 'Non Bodies' examines how anthropometric representation can better reflect the diversity in human bodies, how varied bodies move in space, and how an understanding of the non-universal body can inform design.

Conclusion

Not only is the Jagonari project a powerful lesson on the radically different approach that women can bring to design and build, but if we chart the building's fortunes over the last four decades of social and economic evolution, it is also a powerful allegory for the continued struggle to make women's voices heard in a heteromale-dominated world. Alongside centuries of gender inequality, feminism has become squeezed and increasingly competing to be heard as other sections of society who are discriminated against, have gained attention on their particular issues relating to inequality of access and lack of inclusivity. Women are still talking about women's issues, but face the dichotomy of being one of many voices asking for equality and a re-balancing of the male heteronormative approach to how society operates. We can see, through the chequered history of the Jagonari building, the continued struggle for equality of gender representation; the fragility of maintaining female visibility and the continuing struggle to give sufficient importance to women's concerns. The unfettered march of capitalism and consumerist values by which the 'west' live, have continually eclipsed the 'softer' architectural projects, like Jagonari, inspired by community action and seeking to deliver for the female perspective. It is the ultimate irony that, amongst other uses, the building currently serves as a commercial childcare facility. In that sense it serves the needs of women (who still carry the burden of family and social care responsibilities). But these services are provided as a commercial enterprise, not as a community hub serving residents. There are, however, residual echoes of the original intentions as the building is used by a variety of charities, the NHS and tower hamlets council to provide services for those in particular need in our society. So, in the way that women's issues have become

one of many, this loss of singularity of purpose is reflected in the modern-day use of the building itself.

Has the Jagonari been a successful project? Despite the apparent marginalisation of women in the role of the building today, we can see however, that the founding group's purpose and values are reflected in activities now housed within the centre. Perhaps the success is ultimately not for women per se, but for society as a whole, brought about by the female-led approach to equality and inclusivity in the original build project. An approach, which over time has been adopted more widely by other groups and influenced the way we have all become aware and think about these issues. Perhaps, at 183-185 Whitechapel Road, this influence has transferred itself into the very fabric and philosophy of what this site will always be about.

Bibliography

Books/Articles

Grote, Janie. 1992. "Matrix: A Radical Approach To Architecture". *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*. 158-168.

Matrix (Organization). 2022. *Making space: women and the man made environment*.

GLC backs feminist architects. 1983. *Building Design (Archive : 1969-2014)*(670) (Dec 16): 24, <https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/glc-backs-feminist-architects/docview/2543996504/se-2?accountid=14511> (accessed April 5, 2022).

Madiha Ahmad, Khuram Rashid, and Neelum Naz. 2018. "Study of the ornamentation of Bhong Mosque for the survival of decorative patterns in Islamic architecture". *Frontiers of Architectural Research*. 7 (2): 122-134.

Christine Hannigan (2021): How We Live Now: Reimagining Spaces with Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative, The London Journal.

Websites

Timeline of the Women's Liberation Movement. [online] Available at: <<https://www.bl.uk/sisterhood/timeline>> [Accessed 24 March 2022].

"Reimagining Spaces with Matrix Feminist Design Co-Operative." 2021. Artland Magazine. June 18, 2021. [Accessed April 23] <https://magazine.artland.com/reimagining-spaces-with-matrix-feminist-design-co-operative/>.

"The Mosque Combating Domestic Abuse." 2012. The Guardian. December 7, 2012. [Accessed April 23], 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2012/dec/07/mosque-against-domestic-violence>.

"Jagonari Asian Women's Education Centre, Whitechapel, London – the Twentieth Century Society." n.d. C20society.org.uk. [Accessed April 23], 2022. <https://c20society.org.uk/building-of-the-month/jagonari-asian-womens-education-centre-whitechapel-london>.

"Whitechapel High Street Conservation Area Character Appraisals and Management Guidelines Whitechapel High Street Conservation Area." n.d. [Accessed March 6, 2020]. <https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Planning-and-building-control/Development-control/Conservation-areas/Whitechapel-High-StreetV1.pdf>.

Gallio, Fran, 'Jago Nari, Jago Banhishikha': A short history of The Jagonari Centre in Whitechapel — East End Women's Museum . [Accessed April 10] <https://eastendwomensmuseum.org/blog/2020/9/2/jago-nari-jago-banhishikha-a-short-history-of-the-jagonari-centre-in-whitechapel>

"Jagonari." n.d. Matrix Open Feminist Architecture Archive. [Accessed April 9] <http://www.matrixfeministarchitecturearchive.co.uk/jagonari/>.

Mortice, Zach. 2017. "Decoding Oppression in Architecture: Design as a Tool for Social Justice." Redshift EN. October 24, 2017. <https://redshift.autodesk.com/design-for-social-justice/>.

"Survey of London | Former Jagonari Women's Centre, 183-185 Whitechapel Road." n.d. Surveyoflondon.org. Accessed May 2, 2022. <https://surveyoflondon.org/map/feature/453/detail/>.

Ullah, Ansar Ahmed, and John Eversley. 2010. *Bengalis in London's East End*. London: Swadhinata Trust. <https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Bengalis-in-Londons-East-End-Book.pdf>

Media

Matrix and After: Ways of working around feminism and architecture" *YouTube* video, 1:13:54. Jan 8, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvKbqniisXU&t=3411s> - 28 mins 10

Boys, Jos'Matrix Architects - Jagonari Centre Hackney 1980s' *YouTube* video, 4:49. Aug 6, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TLm8Hfm-HI&t=204s>

"DisOrdinary Architecture: A Virtual Lecture by Dr. Jos Boys." n.d. Www.youtube.com. Accessed Marcj 2, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3j5n61HKso>.

Architecture (CCA), Canadian Centre for. n.d. "Architectures of Care." Www.cca.qc.ca. <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/articles/issues/30/of-migration/81159/architectures-of-care>.

UCL. 2021. "Transcript: Are Buildings Gendered?" The Bartlett. December 20, 2021. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/building-better-bartlett-podcast/transcript-are-buildings-gendered>

List of Figures

1. *Children playing*. n.d. <http://www.matrixfeministarchitecturearchive.co.uk/jagonari/>.
2. *Children in classes*, n.d. <http://www.matrixfeministarchitecturearchive.co.uk/jagonari/>.
3. Thorne, Anne. n.d. *Front Facade*. <https://c20society.org.uk/building-of-the-month/jagonari-asian-womens-education-centre-whitechapel-london>.
4. *Ground Floor Plan*. n.d. <http://www.matrixfeministarchitecturearchive.co.uk/jagonari/>.
5. Santos, Marina. 2018. *NON BODIES, NEW SPACES*.
https://files.cargocollective.com/c625309/SantosMarina_NonBodiesNewSpaces_ThesisBook.pdf.