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INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the production of politics has been practiced within built environments created by various societies, with the aim to resolve problems, conflicts, and make decisions affecting all citizens, including women. Gender representation in political practices is an essential element to achieve equality in society. (Koengkan et al., 2026). Through this context, parliament buildings as places of political production, are perhaps the most crucial settings where the effects of gender and space on one another can be evident.

Building on Rendell's (1995) framework about space and practices of power and gender, this research acknowledges parliament buildings as a fundamental element of political practices within a community. This approach is further supported by research such as (Puwar, 2004; Calder 2026) which reveals that political institutions within male dominated power structures, forming spaces that excluded women from political participation. Feminist movements have challenged these spatial hierarchies through the creation of parallel political spaces (Cornwall and Goetz, 2005), the integration of women into existing institutions, and the call for the redesign of political architecture (Malley, 2012).

While feminist activism has transformed political representation, spatial structures of political institutions continue to reflect historical gendered power systems. Based on such understanding, this research attempts to answer the following question: has inclusion produced genuinely equitable political environments, or have women instead been required to adapt to spaces originally designed for male norms and behaviours?

A review of literature on women's involvement and exclusion in UK politics is first presented. Parallel and alternative feminist examples for political involvement at the global level are examined, then the integration and redesign of existing and future parliaments are explored and compared across UK political institutions.

CHAPTER 1: **EXCLUSION** FROM POLITICAL SPACES

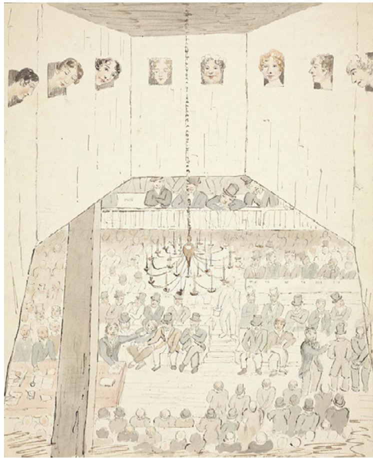

Figure 1: illustration of the ventilator (untitled) by Lady Georgiana Chatterton
source: https://museumcrush.org/the-ventilator-the-cramped-space-where-women-watched-the-proceedings-of-parliament/

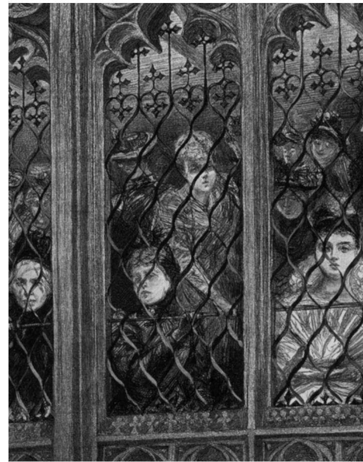

Figure 2: 'The debate in the house of commons on the home rule bill: An appreciative audience in the Ladies Gallery, Paul Renouard 1893
source: https://www.edwardianpromenade.com/politics/ladies-gallery-at-the-commons/

Parliamentary institutions were developed in a time when women were excluded from government. Consequently, parliamentary buildings were designed ‘by men, for men’ (Calder, 2026) meaning it was predominantly guided by male dominated needs and social structures. A key example of this is the Palace of Westminster. According to the Women and Equalities Committee (2022), Westminster was designed exclusively for men 80 years before women could stand for election. This means that this significant representation of political structure in the UK was developed without consideration for women’s participation in politics. Consequently, gendered exclusion became embedded within the spatial organisation of the building itself.

In the 1800s, women’s involvement was to watch and listen, but not to be seen or heard (Takayanagi, 2023). From this we can infer that spaces dedicated for their participation reflect and reinforce their societal roles.

According to Weisman (1994), women who wanted to participate were only permitted to hide in the roof space ‘peering down through the central ventilators in the ceiling’ for any access to the political conversation. This space is referred to as the ‘ventilator’ (Parliament.uk, 2018) (see figure 1). The hidden nature of their place in society was directly manifested in their physical place in the building. As the feminist movement progressed, so did the changes of a woman’s physical place in Westminster. After the rebuilding of the Palace of Westminster in 1834 following the fire, a place formally known as ‘the ladies’ gallery’ and informally known as ‘the cage’ became the new space where women were confined (see figure 2). Similar to ‘the ventilator’, it was a place that only allowed women to watch and listen. A description of an exhibition showing the history of women in Westminster (Parliament.uk, 2018), highlights how the gallery was purposefully closed off by ‘brass grilles’ to further hide the women from the MPs, but also

Figure 3: The Women Members' Room,Illustrated London News 1919
source: https://historyguild.org/women-parliament-and-political-space/?srsltid=AfmBOopvquUp5w3OnLHMgNWaTZCykCv4gmiPmaC_s2cYDYf79if-0Ogy

consequently obscured the women's vision. Once women were permitted to stand in parliament in 1918, they were offered a 'lady member's room'- a small, poorly furnished office which quickly became overcrowded, with meetings encroaching on the corridors as more women MPs were elected and therefore known as 'the tomb' (Parliament.uk, 2018) (see figure 3). These spaces acquiring such negatively connoted labels ('the ventilator', 'the cage' and 'the tomb') emphasise the lack of care towards spaces women occupied. And the devaluation of their contribution to the political conversation.

The spatial organisation of modern Western society is largely underpinned by the 'separate spheres' ideology. The Matrix feminist design co-operative explore this theory, which is defined as an 'ideology which divides city from home, public from private, production from reproduction, and men from women' (Rendell, 1995). This framework is both hierarchal and oppositional, expressing the public city as a 'male realm of production' while reducing the private home to a 'subordinate (female realm) of reproduction' (Rendell, 1995). This hierarchy / opposition is key to the theoretical critique of the 'man-made world'(Rendell, 1995). Feminist architectural history highlights a persistent disconnect within the building industry, focusing on the 'predominance of men as producers of a man-made environment and of women's experiences as users of these spaces' (Rendell, 2022). Because men have historically been the primary makers of the built environment, before women were even granted the right to participate in public political life, architecture has traditionally been assumed male, as the 'somatic norm' (Puwar, 2004)

Matrix (1984) argues that these spatial formations are not neutral, however, they also actively 'reinforced stereotypic assumptions' about the role of a woman in society. By assigning the public realm as male and the private as female, the man-made environment creates 'infrastructural hostility'(Women and Equalities Committee, 2022), where the design of public spaces do not account for the lived realities of women (Matrix, 1984). Ultimately, this framework illustrates that space is not simply a backdrop for social life, instead, it is a product of the social assumptions of the place of women in society, serving as a physical example of historical inequality.

Westminster is an example of this theory, acting as the 'man-made' public 'city' in which they are the main occupiers. Based on the feedback from the Women and Equalities Committee (2022), there have been developments to making Westminster more inclusive, e.g. the addition of an on-site nursery replacing one of the house of commons bars. However, it is also reported that spaces need to be dedicated to breastfeeding, as it is found that spaces currently used for breastfeeding were also being used for professional meetings (Women and Equalities Committee, 2022). The lack of dedicated space thereby creates an exclusionary environment, prioritising the comfort of other MPs over the biological needs of female MPs.

Goodsell (1988) argues that parliament buildings preserve the political values on which they were built. This is reflected in the continued preservation of the physical form, suggesting that not only does the physical space reflect political culture, it also shapes it. Through this framework, Malley (2012) builds on the argument through a feminist lens. According to their research, some MPs stated that 'the appearance of the Palace is

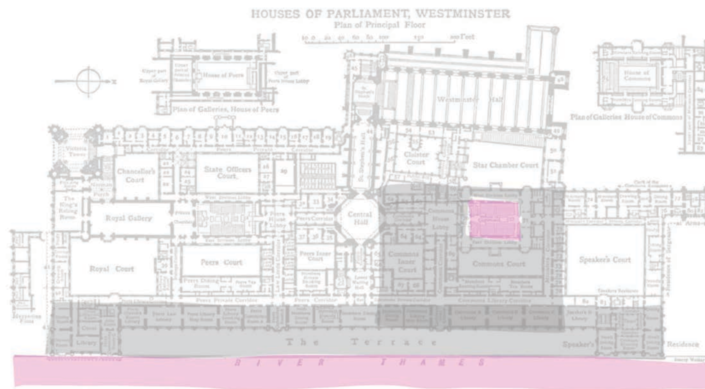

Figure 4: areas surrounding main chamber and River Thames view

reminiscent of an elite gentlemen's club or public school with which they do not identify' and that the Westminster building feels 'forbidding' to 'underrepresented groups'. Malley (2012) argues that these visuals further reinforce the 'male-script' through the iconography dominated by the depicted male politicians, acting as a constant reminder for minority groups of their place in such political space, contributing to the 'gentlemen's club' atmosphere that many female MPs find exclusionary. Malley (2012) also points out the lack of transparency exaggerated by the 'mysterious' 'hidden' corridors. This lack of transparency could pose as a safety concern for harassment towards women. This notion is supported by reports of harassment by Women and Equalities Committee (2022). The lack of transparency is also highlighted as a threatening environment as inappropriate behaviour can go unnoticed (Women and Equalities Committee, 2022).

Since space preserves and informs culture (Goodsell, 1988), then a space designed before women had political rights can be read as evidence of the embedment of exclusion in space, not only law.

The spatial arrangement of Westminster and the positioning of office spaces further plays a role in creating a spatial hierarchy, and therefore a social hierarchy within the system (see figure 4).
According to Psarra, Staiger and Sternberg (2023), the closer the MP is to the chamber, the more power they hold. In addition, an office closer to the River Thames is 'rewarded', reflecting social inequalities in the spatial arrangement and occupation of space. This reinforces Bourdieu's (1991) premise that parliaments are a 'spatial projection of the political field', where the building and space become a physical embodiment of social imbalance. Weisman's 'Discrimination by Design' further supports this

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argument by showing that the built environment can actively reproduce patriarchal values, making exclusion a conscious structural decision (Weisman, 1994). Therefore, architecture is not merely a result of exclusion but also a mechanism that reinforces it.

CHAPTER 2:
PARALLEL FEMINIST POLITICAL **SPACES**

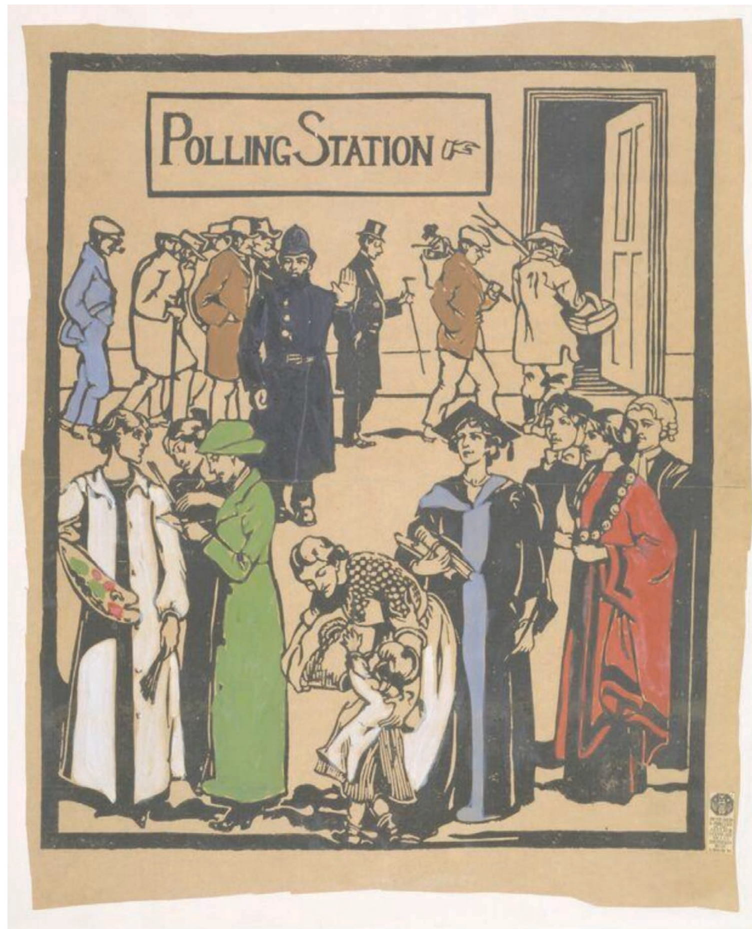

Figure 5: An artwork produced by The Suffrage Atilier 1909-1913
source: https://collections.vam.ac.uk/context/organisation/A7816/suffrage-atelier

Reflecting on the ‘separate spheres’ theory (Matrix’s,1985), Rendell (1995) highlights the existence and need for acknowledgement of a new ‘sphere’ which includes both private and public space, while involving women in both domains. This could be described as a parallel space. These parallel spaces can act as facilitators to force the inclusion of women in the public political space.

Alternative political Feminist spaces became necessary due to the exclusion of women highlighted in chapter 1. This prompted women to create spaces centred on how they organise, speak, act, and occupy. This is supported by Hayden’s ‘The Grand Domestic Revolution’, which reveals that feminist spatial thinking emerged in response to built environments that reinforced unequal urban and domestic spaces, rather than supporting women’s agency (Hayden, 1981).

A historic example of women developing political agency in the private home instead of dominant institutions is the Suffrage atelier (Beebe, Davis and Gleadle, 2017) (see figure 5). By transforming the private home, traditionally seen as a ‘subordinate private female realm of reproduction’, into a ‘space of women’s artistic and political resistance’, these artists effectively collapsed the binary between the domestic and the political (Rendell, 1995), directly challenging the nineteenth-century ‘separate spheres’ ideology. This mirrors the Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative’s later work, which sought to politicise the ‘politics of housework’ and the spatial structure of the home, to challenge stereotypic assumptions about a woman’s place (Matrix, 1985). Just as the Suffrage Atelier utilised the domestic interior to produce political art, Elizabethan women also used the private ‘closet’ for intellectual and

Figure 6: Woman writing in the home, early 1900s
source: https://www.alamy.com/lady-writing-at-her-desk-early-1900s-image401456392.html

political agency through letter writing (Beebe, Davis and Gleadle, 2017) (see figure 6). In both cases, women turned sites of potential physical confinement into 'counter-spaces' (or parallel spaces) for political participation and intellectual production, reclaiming the home as a domain of active practice rather than passive existence (Rendell, 2022).

The 'dynamic, reciprocal notion of space' explained by Beebe, Davis and Gleadle (2017), where the creation of these spaces 'actively shaped' the feminist identities of the women strongly aligns with Goodsell's 'Formation' function (Goodsell, 1988). Goodsell (1988) argues that architecture and physical settings determine and affect the thoughts and actions of their occupants. This supports the idea that by shaping their domestic environments into political workshops, the suffrage artists and Edwardian women were, therefore, shaped by those spaces to see themselves as legitimate public and political actors (Malley, 2012).

These examples can be read through the lens of Rendell (2022) in 'feminist figurations' which are defined as 'concretely situated historical positions' and expressions of one's specific positioning in space and time (Braidotti, 1993 cited in Rendell, 2022). The suffrage artists were not only using the home as a convenient backdrop; they were engaging in a critical spatial practice that redefined their relationship to both the private and public worlds of their time.

While Chapter 1 focuses on how women were relegated to segregated spaces like 'the ventilator', 'the cage' or 'the tomb' at Westminster (Parliament.uk, 2018), the Suffrage Atelier represents the opposite: the creation of autonomous, integrated spaces women's own making. In Westminster, architecture acted as tool to maintain patriarchal authority, whereas in the Edwardian home and in the suffrage atelier, the architecture was repurposed by the women, proving that when women participate in the production of space, they create space

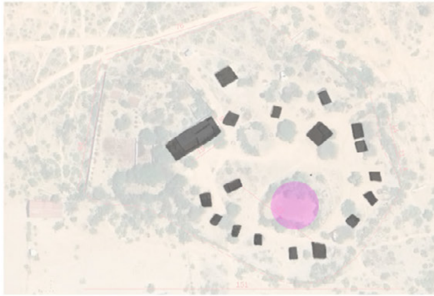

Figure 7: comparing the Umoja Village to a traditional Kenyan Village

which validate their own experiences and political agency (Beebe, Davis and Gleadle, 2017).
Although not a political space, The Matrix feminist design co-operative show that women's different social roles and needs, which traditional environments often failed to accommodate, shape their experiences of space (Matrix, 1985). The need for feminist parallel spaces, specifically in politics, is further supported by Cornwall and Goetz (2005) as they express the importance of 'building new pathways into politics…beyond existing democratic spaces'. Together, these arguments suggest that parallel feminist spaces were not merely symbolic alternatives but also physical political responses to exclusion, enabling women to build agency outside dominant political institutions.

The Umoja Women Cultural village offers an Interesting international example of a feminist parallel political space on a larger urban scale.

This women-only village in Kenya was created with the goal to protect women from gender-based violence (Kiiru, 2023). Although the village layout is very similar to a traditional Kenyan village, the intention and use of spaces are different. For example, both village types are arranged in a circular arrangement, with dwellings around the perimeter with a central communal element in the middle. However, a traditional Kenyan village is centred around the protection of their livestock, whereas in the Umoja Women's village, the dwellings are centred around an open communal gathering space, supervised for the safety of women and children using it, without the threat of male interference (Lolosoli, 2025) (See figure 7). Kharbawy (2021) discusses how the existence of such communities are in themselves acts of resistance and are a 'radical moment in the (post) colonial architectural imagination.'
And frames the creation of a women's-only space as an anchor for women's support.

Figure 8: The Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp 'occupying space'
source: https://unireadinghistory.com/2021/03/02/greenham-common/

The Greenham Common Women's peace camp is a key historic example of a local feminist political parallel space. It was a 19-year-long encampment (1981-2000) located at the RAF base in Greenham Common, Berkshire (Reason, 2025). The long-term encampment resulted in the creation of a space dedicated to women's needs and political voices. The camp became a 'contesting enclosure' and created 'feminist and ecofeminist commons' (Tamburi, 2025). Since the government did not hear their position against NATO's decision to use this base as a place for US nuclear missiles, they created a women-only community to occupy the base. During this occupation, as well as symbolically breaking boundaries, they would periodically tear down the surrounding fence, breaking the threshold and violating the 'male space' (Lubelska, 2020) (see figure 8). Laware (2004) examines personal accounts, where a journalist recalls conversations they have had with the women involved in the camp. They reflect on it as a positive time when 'women finally owned a space for their collective political energy'. This demonstrates that the camp was a spatial and political catalyst evidencing the crucial role of feminist parallel spaces for women's involvement in the political realm.

CHAPTER 3:
INTEGRATION VS **REDESIGN**

INTEGRATION:

As discussed in Chapter 1, parliamentary spaces were historically designed around male participation, excluding women both politically and spatially. Although feminist movements and suffrage campaigns throughout history gradually drove women into formal politics, social integration into these institutions did not automatically transform these political spaces (Parliament.uk, 2018). This chapter explores how political architecture continues to determine experiences of inclusion and exclusion, examining whether existing parliamentary buildings require redesign and further adaptation to support gender equity. To investigate this, the chapter compares historically established institutions such as Westminster with newer parliamentary buildings, including the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Senedd, where inclusion and accessibility were consciously embedded within the design process (Malley, 2012).

Women moved from segregated and hidden spaces such as ‘the ventilator’, ‘the cage’ and ‘the Tomb’ into the central parliamentary chamber in Westminster (Parliament.uk, 2018). ‘The tomb’ specifically is a great example of a forced adaptation that occurred historically in Westminster. Women were provided with the ‘Lady Members’ room’ or ‘the tomb’, a space that was not suitable and became overcrowded as the number of women MPs increased. This increasing overcrowding led to the acceptance and, as a result, the integration of women MPs into the main spaces where male MPs were prioritised. Yet, these institutions largely upheld the spatial values and power structures on which they were founded. As a result, the participation of women in political spaces raises crucial architectural questions: has inclusion produced genuinely equitable political environments, or have women instead been required to adapt to spaces originally designed for male norms and behaviours?

While the presence of women in parliamentary buildings has undeniably altered how these spaces are inhabited, the sources suggest that the ‘somatic norm’ remains stubbornly male (Puwar, 2004). Women entering these environments are often viewed as ‘space invaders’ or bodies out of place in a ‘man-made world’ designed for specific masculinities. Consequently, instead of the building adapting to its new occupants, women often feel compelled to ‘manage’ their femininity or adopt a more masculine attitude in dress and behaviour to gain legitimacy. For example, Malley (2012) reveals that Nicola Sturgeon reflected that in her early career, she mimicked masculine dress of her male colleagues just to be taken seriously (Malley, 2012). This tension suggests that simple inclusion without fundamental spatial transformation is insufficient to create an equal environment. Psarra, Staiger, and Sternberg (2023) draw on the work of Flinders (2023), arguing that integration into a non-adapted space results in ‘silent complicity’. In this state, the architecture of everyday life remains unexamined, resulting in ‘locking-in’ historical inequalities within the literal structure of the building. Harcourt and Escobar (2001) further imply that feminist politics must go beyond access to the conversation; it must ‘change the very terrain on which we consider politics’. They argue that true equality requires the creation of entirely new power structures and cultural forms, re-embedding politics in physical form, rather than ‘resettling’ into old ones that have historically silenced women (Harcourt and Escobar, 2001). So, in more physical terms, does women’s presence fundamentally challenge spatial logic?

A clear example of this failure to transform ‘the terrain’ (Harcourt and Escobar, 2001) or challenge spatial logic is found at Westminster. The Women and Equalities Committee (2022) reports that the longstanding ‘patch and mend’ approach to the Palace is no longer sustainable.

This method fails to address the 'infrastructural hostility' (Women and Equalities Committee, 2022) embedded in the Victorian design, such as the lack of dedicated breastfeeding spaces, which forces female MPs to choose between parental duties and legislative work. Until institutions move beyond 'tinkering' toward a 'feminist blueprint' (Women and Equalities Committee, 2022) like that attempted at Holyrood, where rituals inclusive in their formation become inclusive in their enactment, the architecture will continue to act as a 'material anchor' for historical exclusion.

Does the failure of the adaptation of spaces in response to the integration of women in political spaces highlighted in the discussed examples, point towards the need to further adapt or even redesign?

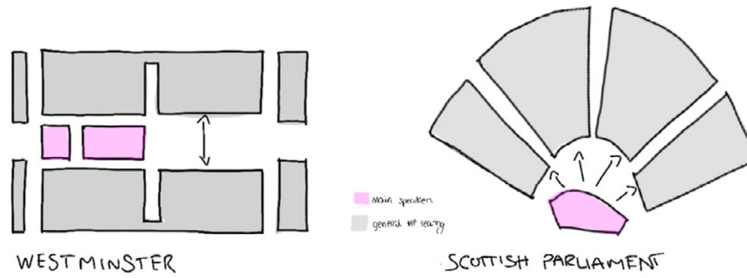

Figure 9: Comparing the layout of the debate chambers in Westminster vs. Holyrood

Figure 10: Transparent in the Scottish Parliament
source: https://www.mirallestagliabue.com/project/scottish-parliament-building/

REDESIGN:

To achieve an equitable political environment, feminist critiques of political culture must translate into new spatial models for political institutions. This process is frequently defined as re-designing a practice of working within existing principles but seeing 'old problems with new eyes' to enable novel solutions (Celis and Childs, 2020; Saward, 2020). While historic buildings like Westminster often act as a trap of path dependency, locking in majoritarian and exclusionary models of power, the creation of new institutions like the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Senedd represents an opportunity to break this 'silent complicity' (Flinders, 2023).

The Scottish Parliament (Holyrood) serves as a primary example of a 'feminist institutional blueprint' (Shaw, 2024). Unlike Westminster, which was built 'by men, for men', Holyrood was conceived as a 'blank canvas' for feminist institutional innovation (Mackay, 2014, cited in Shaw, 2024). Its architectural configuration was intentionally designed to 'turn struggle into conversation'(Tagliabue, 2023). This is most visible in the semi-circular debating chamber, which avoids the oppositional, 'two sword lengths apart' layout of the Commons in Westminster to encourage mutuality and consensus (Shaw, 2024) (see figure 9). Furthermore, the non-permeable nature of Westminster contrasts with Holyrood which incorporates 'integrated spaces' like the Garden Lobby, designed as a non-hierarchical 'crossroads' where MSPs, staff, and the public mix freely, reflecting principles of transparency and openness (Siebert and Orr, 2022), creating a more naturally surveilled, and consequently, a safer environment for women members (see figure 10).

Similarly, the Welsh Parliament (Senedd) was designed to 'demystify' governance and physically reflect an inclusive political culture (Harbour, 2023). Harbour (2023) describes the building as a 'public living room' where

Figure 11: Transparency in the Welsh Parliament
source: https://rshp.com/projects/civic/senedd-cymru-welsh-parliament/?_gl=1*1m0w-ma*_up*MQ..*_ga*MjY5NTI0Mjk2LjE3Nzk3OTAwNDc.*_ga_X0XXDV7MK4*czE3Nz-k3OTAwNDckbzEkZzEkdDE3Nzk3OTAxMTckajYwJGwwJGgw

Figure 12: Shauna McMullan's porcelain sentences
source: https://www.parliament.scot/visit/events-and-exhibitions/art-collection/travelling-the-distance

visual connections and transparency between the electorate and the elected are always maintained, again creating a safer environment for women members (see figure 11). Through actively involving minority groups in the design process, the Senedd evolved into an environment that architecturally validates a wider representation of people (Edwards, 2004, cited in Malley, 2012). This approach moves beyond ‘patch and mend’ adjustments to address ‘infrastructural hostility’ from the ground up (Women and Equalities Committee, 2022).

While these approaches to designing parliamentary buildings are more catered to women’s needs, as established, redesigning these institutions requires more than just new shapes, it requires changing the ‘terrain on which we consider politics’ (Harcourt and Escobar, 2001), which involves embedding ‘subjective material practices’. In contrast to the unconscious exclusionary approach of Westminster of using historic symbols of patriarchal authority throughout the building, the Scottish Parliament (Holyrood) utilises symbols to consciously create an inclusive environment. An example of this is Shauna McMullan’s porcelain sentences (see figure12), reinforcing this inclusive approach into the fabric of the building to provide ‘physical anchor points’ for diverse identities (Malley, 2012; Shaw, 2024).

While some modern examples attempt this inclusive approach, a wider shift in political architecture is still needed to mirror the ongoing societal change. Only by utilising architectural imagination to envision spaces that prioritise care and transparency, can parliaments move from being ‘living stone monuments’ of the past to productive forces for an equitable future (Harcourt and Escobar, 2001).

CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that the architecture of political space has historically reflected and reinforced patriarchal systems of power, embedding exclusion not only within political culture but also within the spatial organisation of these institutions. From the hidden ‘ventilator’, ‘cage’ and ‘tomb’ spaces at Westminster, women’s participation in politics was long mediated through spaces that symbolised their marginal status. These examples reveal that exclusion operated architecturally as much as legislatively, producing spaces catering for male authority while positioning women as outsiders within the political realm.

The creation of parallel feminist political spaces emerged as a direct response to this exclusion. Whether through the Suffrage Atelier, the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp, or the Umoja Women’s Village, women reclaimed and reshaped space to support collective agency, visibility, and political participation. These environments directly challenged the ideology of ‘separate spheres’ (Hayden, 1981), by breaking the thresholds between domestic and political life, demonstrating that space can actively shape social and political norms (Rendell, 2022). Rather than just occupying existing structures, alternative feminist spaces reconfigured how political life itself could be organised, showing that architecture can enable alternative forms of power, and community, acting as a trojan to formal political spaces.

However, the integration of women into formal political institutions has not automatically dismantled the masculine spatial logic on which many of these institutions were founded. Westminster, despite reforms, continues to embody what Puwar (2004) describes as the ‘somatic norm’, where women are often expected to adapt to existing masculine cultures and behaviours in order to be included in ‘public’ space.

This reinforces the central question explored throughout this research: has inclusion produced genuinely equitable political environments, or have women instead required to adapt to spaces originally designed for male norms and behaviours? The evidence shows that while the presence of women has altered the occupation of political space, the architectural transformation of these institutions remains incomplete.

Simultaneously, newer built parliamentary buildings such as the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Senedd demonstrate that redesign can challenge inherited political cultures. By prioritising openness, transparency, and non-adversarial interaction, these institutions illustrate how feminist critiques of political culture can translate into new spatial models for political space as supported by Malley (2012). Yet, the incomplete nature of these transformations raises another question: does architectural transformation remain incomplete because wider social transformation remains incomplete? If political architecture reflects the values of the society that produces it (Goodsell, 1988), then lack of progress with achieving gender equality in wider society may continue to limit the extent to which political space can truly change.

This research ultimately argues that architecture should not be understood as a passive reflection of society, but instead, as a potential tool for social transformation. Feminist redesign, adaptive reuse, and the creation of parallel political spaces, demonstrate that space can actively influence social norms, participation, and systems of power. Instead of waiting for complete social equality to transform political spaces, redesign itself can become part of the process through which more equal political and social cultures are produced.

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