

Making Room for Art: Case Studies of Women Artists and Their Studios

Gabrièle T. Abowd
Doctoral Candidate in Curriculum and Instruction
Art Education Major
Folklore Minor

For

Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers in Art Education

Spring 2007

The art studio, in the context of the home, is a relatively unexplored locus of inquiry in my two fields of interest: art education and folklore, specifically the study of vernacular architecture. Exploring the interface between the built environment of the home and an artist working inside it, reveals physical, psychological, and cognitive issues. Here, older women artists living in the Midwestern United States describe their home workspace and tell how it influences their artistic practices.

Women—especially those whose main occupation is not “artist” but mother, teacher, or worker of another sort—often struggle to claim time and space for their art. With a conceptual foundation based on feminist theory (with its focus on the promotion of women’s rights, interests, and issues, as well as its emphasis on gender politics and power relationships, providing an instinctive and useful frame for my study), I intend to explore the question of how “ordinary” women with artistic skills have created, often improvised, studio space right in their homes to accommodate their work in fiber arts, bookmaking, and painting, among other media, all while balancing a plethora of other life responsibilities.

Through her organization of the space and in the artwork she produces, the artist in her home studio creates “texts” for us to interpret. This study emphasizes women’s experiences as both fashioners of workspace and makers of art, thus broadening the scope of what constitutes an art studio and who is considered an artist.

Scholars in the field of art education have argued for studying the intersection of art, space, and culture. Laura Chapman (1999) explains:

Teachers of art have a special obligation to address the aesthetic and human consequences of architecture and the built environment. Those consequences are

not trivial. They are evident in how people perceive, think about and treat environments—and ultimately, *each other*. (p. vii)

As a result, this research seeks specific women's stories and perspectives as vehicles for understanding the psychological, physical, and educational impact of production space on their artwork and in their lives.

Studios as vernacular forms

Art historian, Wanda Corn (2005) discusses artists' homes and studios as “a special kind of archive” (p. 2). She emphasizes that, differently than artists' diaries, letters, photographs, and newspaper reviews, the buildings themselves provide crucial historical evidence. While Corn refers to the studios of known historical figures, this paper concerns itself with living, non-famous artists whose home/studio tells a story in the present tense.

The working women represented in this paper come from various socio-economic backgrounds, and each case brings to light tacit messages regarding the politics of household spaces and family structures, often based on gender and income. In *Invitation to Vernacular Architecture*, Carter and Cromley (2005) note that architectural evidence can reveal mundane behaviors rarely spoken of in conventional texts. The built structures show us things about ourselves that may seem too commonplace to mention, but which nevertheless articulate routines essential for our survival (Carter & Cromley, 2005). Their assertion provides a foundation for my research with artists who produce art along side their other domestic duties.

My exploration delves inside dwellings to find personalized art rooms, themselves ripe with indications of how the architecture helps define the work that happens inside it.

In gathering information on this topic, I spoke to male artists as well. I also looked into how other types of artists, writers in particular, have fashioned and reflected on the spaces in which they write. Speaking to an array of artists—men and women—expands my understanding of the women on whom I’ve chosen to focus—a whole spectrum of experience becomes clear. One sculptor, David Barr, suggested that the question I am posing is multifaceted in nature: “What do artists do with, in, and because of their space?”

Some women’s art studios approximate the conventional notion of what a studio should be: a dedicated space outfitted with appropriate equipment and with north-facing windows, attached to or nearby the artist’s house. More commonly, however, women describe innovative uses of home elements like closets, dressers, and dining tables—even living room bookshelves and kitchen counters—that serve as makeshift art space. Small spaces are optimized through expert organizational techniques. Some “studio” facilities are even transportable and function like a satellite workshop, a portion of an actual art room which travels with the artist like a paint box or a knitting bag. A woman’s home, income, stage in life, and family—especially if she has children—all impact her solution to the problem of making room for art.

In conversations with artists, it becomes clear that the studio, or its proxy, is a conduit for understanding the unspoken politics and psychology of home space turned art venue. In what follows, I consider what women do *with* their space (meaning how they manipulate and organize the physical environment), what they do *in* their space (the type of art they make), and what they do *because of* their space (as in, how they adapt to the limitations presented by their particular home).

Mary Sweney, Toledo, Ohio

At age 78, Mary tells a life history of ingenuity, skill, and perseverance. An entrepreneur from a young age, Mary's industry and curiosity enabled her to make and sell artistic creations, and in turn, help to support her family financially. At age eight, she announced, to her mother's dismay, she wanted to be a designer and an artist and began sewing her own clothes out of used lace curtains and seed bags.

Mary lives in a small two-bedroom ground-floor apartment, all of which is covered with her creative work: handmade window treatments, a painted kitchen floor resembling a garden path of stones and moss, walls adorned with her large paintings of golf courses and trellises of silk flowers and birds to bring nature inside. The back bedroom, which measures approximately 8 by 10 feet, functions as the dedicated art room.

She explains:

The workroom should be well organized, everything in its proper place. I have nine large drawers and 120 smaller storage spaces (4" x 2" x 6"). The large plastic cabinets hanging on the wall have room for all your pencils, pens, erasers—everything that needs to be organized. It saves a lot of time. At the end of the day, put back everything in its proper place. Make this a priority so everyday everything goes smooth, and if something else comes up, you don't have to lose it. You are still on schedule.

Despite the compact nature of her space, Mary produces large-scale items for home furnishing stores in town. She makes the space work, explaining:

You don't need a mile; I make window treatments that are a hundred and forty inches long in this house. Swags, really fancy stuff. I make it in that back room. And I have [saw] horses I put through my living room, and I put the board on that; the swags go on and then each one I get done, I bring out here and staple it, until I get it complete; I call Dan and he comes and gets it out of my house because it's filled! [laugh] I don't need much room, put me in a closet and I'll make a lot of bucks! [laugh]

In the studio, Mary derives a great feeling of satisfaction. Currently she is developing a line of handbags, painting landscapes, and creating whatever else comes to mind. She describes the role her studio plays in her life:

I love my art room, I go into it many times a day and just stand. It's my solitude, my get-away, my expressions. I am always happy and relaxed [there]. It is very hard to explain how I feel. When I give to it, it always gives back. When I need it, it's always there to fulfill what I intend to do. It's a fulfillment in my life and world that marriage didn't have.

Mary's first marriage lasted forty-eight years. She describes a jealous husband who was disturbed by her ability to envision something, make it, and sell it, rendering her self-sufficient and pleased by the process. In the days when she was raising her three daughters and taking care of her ill husband, she felt their disapproval when she would retreat into her studio. "They were upset about that because they wanted me with them." Her art room was a point of contention in her family relationships.

Even as a child, Mary realized the necessity of an ordered and supportive environment to facilitate her art making. Home was a hectic place with many chores and

a sick mother to tend to. She would go to the attic of the house in order to find peace and solitude to make her dresses. Now, late in life and twice widowed, Mary's time is her own, her art room is at the ready, and she creates with total abandon.

Beth Dwaihy Barr, Novi, Michigan

Beth, at age 62, has been knitting for most of her life. She makes garments like sweaters, coats, socks, hats, scarves, dresses, gloves and mittens, baby clothing, and some jewelry knitted with beads, fossils, wire, and ribbon tape. In the past, Beth was a quilt-maker but lost the ability to work with the tiny quilting needle because of arthritis in her hands and neck.

Her home studio is a long narrow office in which a huge cedar closet houses most of her yarns and beads. In another closet she stores her pattern books, records, and needles. She keeps more materials on shelves, in large, labeled plastic boxes, and in knitting bags.

Beth's materials are precisely organized. She first divides them into categories—yarn, buttons, ribbon, needles, books, beads, knitting/crocheting wire. Then yarn is divided according to weight: chunky, bulky, worsted, sport, aran, baby, sock, fingering, and novelty yarns. After weight, the yarn is grouped by color. Threads are grouped by color as well. Needles are organized by circular and double pointed and then by size. She has a huge button collection organized into categories of: plastic, novelty, shell, ceramic, vintage, crystal, and so on. Beads are grouped according to value (the good beads and the cheap beads), then size, then color. She keeps the beads in clear plastic boxes and keeps the boxes on trays stacked on top of one another. Beth has a long desk with shelves and a

comfortable chair that faces rows of pictures of her family and friends, the recipients of her work.

A series of knitting bags—her portable studios—contain yarn for current projects. She explains her system:

The knitting bags are lined up in my studio by importance of finishing a project—such as, if I don’t finish this project, the kid I’m making it for will grow too big for it. I always have at least one knitting bag in my car and one on my shoulder. In one bag there will be one to four projects, for example, two pair of socks, a sweater, and a shawl.

Beth refers to her knitting as a “moveable feast.” She fits an incredible number of implements into her knitting bag, so that she will never be without an important tool. Each item has its distinct purpose and place in the bag.

Beth’s home studio was created by her husband, whose sculpture studio is located on the floor below. Her space is essentially an enclosed loft, built to her specifications, and she says, “It is very much a room of my own.” Her room is a multifunctional place where she does office work for their household, as well as her own teaching and artwork. In addition, it is a room beloved by others:

I also have a huge cupboard full of toys and children’s books in the studio for grandchildren, nieces, and nephews to play with when they come over. When they come in the house, first thing, they run up to the studio, find their pictures on my desk, and then open the toy cupboard and dig in to find their favorite [play things]. It’s very important for me to have them there playing in my workspace. They, and the rest of my family, are the reason I knit. It is also a place that attests

to the love of my husband and my love for him. He built it for me with his own hands. I help him with his work there. So, it is a place of tenderness and love.

For Beth, the studio is ever present because of the knitting bags that she carries with her wherever she goes. She feels very comfortable doing her work anywhere, including in the car, at doctor's offices, at the theater, in airplanes, bank lines, bed, and church. Because of these different venues for her work, Beth adjusts her tools accordingly. She uses bamboo, ebony, or rosewood needles in the theatre because they do not click as metal needles do and bother others in the audience. She also takes only simple patterns when working in the dark so she doesn't have to switch needles or even look at the work as she would with something in a multicolored, lace, or cabled pattern. She carries multiple projects with her at all times so if she does drop a stitch in a dark setting, she can simply pick up another project and continue working.

Making room for art

These women have made room for art in their homes and in their lives despite a number of obstacles to doing so: small living spaces, family pressures, arthritis, illness, financial concerns, and jobs outside the home. In telling the story of their studio, they start with the physical environment and what the architecture allows. Eventually, analysis brings out things that are invisible to us, and yet shape us.

In the study of material culture, buildings are distinct because they have both interiors and exteriors. Women, often the crafters of interiors, are not justly represented in the historical record of architecture. Henry Glassie (2000) attributes this oversight to an inadequate definition of the subject. He writes:

If the intimate ordering of common life mattered in history as much as it does in reality, then the interior would matter, families would matter, communities would matter, and women would be in the story. Architecture would be defined correctly, and buildings would assume the powerful role they deserve in history.

(P. 67)

Each woman presented here has innovated the interior of her home to define “studio” in new ways, simultaneously proving herself as an artist. In each case a metaphor for the studio emerges: Mary’s art room is a sanctuary, a healing place, and Beth’s studio is an extension of her own body—an extra appendage—as her work is almost always physically with her. Making room for what is essential to her life, each artist fashions an art space in which it is easy for her to think and move and find and function in all the ways she must in order to make her art.

Implications for art education

Analyzing the spaces in which artists work helps us to understand more about artistic processes, about ways in which artists prioritize the activities of their life, and about the value of visual forms of expression in (here, Midwestern American) culture. This in turn offers hope for more egalitarian and democratically accessible notions of and approaches to art. This work, in its emphasis on women and the studios they inhabit, has the potential to broaden the record of contemporary art practices. In so doing, it offers new resources to educators creating art curricula—the kind of curricula in which all types of women and all forms of visual art are valued; to other artists building studios of their own; and to people in general who wish to integrate art with their life.

I believe we, in art education, need more models of working people, not of an elite class, who make art because they have a deep conviction about doing so. Defying conventional approaches to studying the famous “masters” of art, I hope my study will serve the field of art education by addressing the aesthetic and human consequences of the built environment.

References

- Carter, T. & Cromley, E. C. (2005). *Invitation to vernacular architecture: A guide to the study of buildings and landscapes*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.
- Chapman, L. (1999). Preface. In J. K. Guilfoil & A. R. Sandler (Eds.), *Built environment education in art education* (pp. vi-vii). Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Corn, W. (2005). Artists' homes and studios: A special kind of archive. *American Art*, 19(1), 2-11.
- Glassie, H. (2000). *Vernacular architecture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.