“Every Story Told”: Centering Women’s History
“Women Are Everywhere”: Celebrating The Women’s Building

DONNA GRAVES

The Women’s Building (TWB), an iconic mural-covered structure in San Francisco’s Mission District, was recently added to the National Register of Historic Places for its history as a site of radical and intersectional feminist organizing. Recognizing this aspect of U.S. history is itself something of a landmark. Women’s history—specifically the history of second-wave feminism—has not yet received the level of site-based documentation that has been undertaken for other under-represented histories in recent decades. Not a single local, regional, or national survey or theme study has yet been conducted to situate this important history in the built environment.
Because properties associated with post–World War II feminism have just begun to reach 50 years, the age at which resources are typically considered for the National Register, few places currently listed on the register are designated for their association with this history, even though the national significance of this social movement and its contributions to broad patterns of U.S. history are well established. As historians Rosalynn Baxandall and Linda Gordon write: “Women’s liberation was the largest social movement in the history of the U.S. … The women’s liberation movement, as it was called in the 1960s and 1970s, or feminism, as it is known today, reached into every home, school, and business, into every form of entertainment and sport. Like a river overflowing its banks and seeking a new course, it permanently altered the landscape.”

Second-wave feminists (a term that is rightfully debated) in the United States took on the important project of creating opportunities for women to envision a more equitable society and to establish their rights. While some feminists worked to gain entry for women into previously all-male or male-dominated realms, others created women-centered arenas to nurture women’s cultural, social, economic, and political expression and autonomy. The physical manifestations of second-wave feminism—the spaces where these activities took place—were nearly always in existing buildings that were usually rented, not owned. The remarkable longevity of TWB, described as “the first woman-owned and operated community center in the country,” is due to its founders’ decision to purchase and maintain a large historic social hall for their own use.

**FINDING A ROOM OF THEIR OWN**

A coalition of women’s groups seeking to support and catalyze a broad range of women’s rights initiatives and projects founded the San Francisco Women’s Centers (SFWC) in 1970. In 1975 SFWC and its local partners began organizing a pioneering conference about violence against women. The ethnically and racially diverse group of women who planned the event developed a broad definition of violence that included physical, social, political,
economic, and cultural acts directed against women. Conference organizers debated who should be welcome at the event and finally settled on a position that only women and girls would be admitted, prompting San Francisco State University to pull its sponsorship as host just a few weeks before the gathering.

The experience of scrambling for conference meeting space led a core group of SFWC members to look into purchasing a building, and they settled on 3548 18th Street. Originally built in 1910 as a German athletic and social hall, the four-story building then served as home to the Sons and Daughters of Norway until SFWC purchased it in 1978. Buying and managing TWB presented a significant challenge for a grassroots organization, calling for new and expanded skills in fundraising, financial planning, contract negotiations, publicity, tenant recruitment, and property management.

Horizontal power structures and collective decision-making were hallmarks of radical second-wave feminism. Thus, in the early years of establishing TWB, volunteers motivated by their passion for the vision donated hours upon hours of time to numerous committee meetings as well as to the labor of repairing and renovating the structure. The relatively reasonable rents and low cost of living in the Bay Area in the 1960s and ’70s made the project possible, as did work subsidies from federally funded programs such as Volunteers in Service to America and the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, which employed many young, low-income people in those decades.

Despite organizational growing pains and hostile external political forces—the building suffered an arson fire and received a bomb threat—TWB successfully provided rental space to more than 300 community organizations during its initial year and operated a childcare center for women working or attending events there. Thanks to an open-door rental policy, a remarkable range of activities drew thousands of people to TWB over the course of that year—from the continued meetings of the Norwegian lodges that had traditionally gathered there to the annual Mr. Golden West Body-Building Championship, the wedding
of a young Latinx couple, and a reading by renowned African American poet Gwendolyn Brooks.

ESTABLISHING AN INTERSECTIONAL ORGANIZATION

From the beginning, TWB activists rejected the singular focus, and sometimes separatist stance, that characterized some feminist organizations at the time. Instead, they hosted or organized myriad events that reflected the concerns and cultures of diverse communities across the Bay Area. Motivated in part by the need to meet the cost of maintaining a large building, TWB organizers realized the importance of attracting broad constituencies and expanded their reach across differences of race/ethnicity, disability, gender and sexual orientation, and opinion. Tenants of TWB held varying ideological positions within the feminist movement, which created an unusual overlap of organizations in newfound proximity and fostered debates, conflicts, and alliances.

This poster advertising the first black lesbian conference is emblematic of the intersectional events held at The Women’s Building.

IMAGE COURTESY OF DOCS POPULI
TWB founders envisioned their purpose and constituencies broadly, as evidenced by their carefully crafted goal statement of 1979: “The Women’s Building will actively work to further people’s struggles against oppression through race, minority, culture, disability, sexual orientation, age, life style, and class differences.”

TWB was birthed at a time when many women were grappling with what a feminist identity outside of the heterosexual, white, middle-class experience would look like. The U.S. women’s movement has often been understood as primarily by and for middle-class white women—due, at least in part, to an understanding and documentation of what constitutes women’s activism that has often left out the activism and influence of poor women and women of color. Beginning in the late 1960s, feminist organizations developed more nuanced approaches to social change that incorporated many voices analyzing and addressing race and class issues. African American feminists were at the vanguard of considering the intersections of race, class, and gender. As they and other activists increasingly questioned the idea of “woman” as a singular political, social, and even experiential category, the term “intersectionality” emerged.3

Such explorations fundamentally shaped TWB’s program and politics, and it was among the first to apply this approach to feminist organizing at the institutional level. As the organization’s first executive director, Carmen Vasquez, recalled: “The race and class conversations at the building, they were continuous, they really were. They imbued just about everything we did.” Roma Guy, one of TWB’s founders, recalled, “We understood that we can’t have real social change for women unless we connect with all people’s issues, because women are everywhere.”

Many of the organizations housed at TWB were strongly lesbian identified, and a significant portion of the projects sponsored by TWB were developed by lesbians to serve lesbians and other LGBTQ-identified women—including the San Francisco Network for Battered Lesbian and Bisexual Women, Lesbian Visual Artists, Lilith Lesbian Theatre Collective, Older Lesbian Organizing Committee, and Lavender Youth Recreation and Information Center. In addition,
a remarkable range of community meetings and programs reflected the concerns of others whose identities fell within the LGBTQ umbrella, from AIDS activism and research to participation in the first National Bisexual Conference (1990) and the first transgender female-to-male conference of the Americas (1995).

While developing a broad and inclusive vision for a progressive women’s movement, TWB activists and tenant organizations also worked to forge authentic partnerships with organizations and residents in their new, predominately Latinx neighborhood, which was undergoing a wave of gentrification. Owning a building in the Mission District, a place with a complex political and social history, gave them a stake in the neighborhood’s well-being and future. As they settled into their new home, TWB activists explicitly built on the organization’s feminist and lesbian roots to encompass the thriving activism of their working-class and immigrant Latinx neighbors. From its earliest days, TWB was announced by two signs—one reading “The Women’s Building” and the other “El Edificio de Mujeres”—a pointed recognition of where it was located and who was welcome there. TWB activists also sought to
find common ground with their Mission District neighbors in campaigns against police violence. The bombing, threats, and arson TWB had suffered made the organization more dependent on the police. Yet those same threats also reinforced the vulnerabilities that tenants of TWB had in common with other marginalized communities, which were targets of police violence and suffered from a lack of police protection.

By the early 1990s, in part due to concerns raised by the major 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, TWB’s directors were considering the need to renovate and retrofit the building. An ambitious mural project, Maestrapeace, provided the centerpiece for public events designed to draw attention to the building’s history and future. The title is a semantic play on the term “masterpiece”—maestra is Spanish for woman teacher or master. Maestrapeace was created collaboratively by a collective of seven artists: Juana Alicia, Miranda Bergman, Edythe Boone, Susan Kelk Cervantes, Meera Desai, Yvonne Littleton, and Irene Perez. Bergman described the group as “two African Americans, two Latinas, one East Indian, and two Caucasians, one Jewish; lesbian, straight, and bisexual.” Completed in 1994, the enormous painting took almost 18 months to create and required labor from dozens of volunteers. It functions as a visual history and celebration of women activists, scientists, artists, anonymous heroines, and deities from around the world and is widely recognized as a major example of the mural arts movement. Mural scholars have pronounced Maestrapeace “easily one of the most significant mural projects in the history of the city” and “the most ambitious collectively produced women’s muralist project ever.”

THE ENDURING SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WOMEN’S BUILDING

Even in the absence of a national theme study about second-wave feminism (which should be undertaken), we know that tangible remains of this movement endure—from sites with ephemeral associations, such as places of protest, to buildings that housed feminist organizations, activities, and businesses. Looking at the variety of women-centered spaces established during the 1960s...
and ’70s, preservationists could easily compile a list of property types to document, protect, and interpret—including domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers, feminist presses and bookstores, coffee houses, financial institutions that served women, women’s health clinics, and arts/performance spaces.

Recent scholarship demonstrates that women’s centers like TWB, which appeared in various forms and occupied a variety of building types across the United States in the 1960s and ’70s, were especially important manifestations of the grassroots movement for gender equality and social transformation. According to scholar Daphne Spain, more than 100 women’s centers had been independently established across the United States by the mid-1970s. California, New York, and Massachusetts had the largest numbers, but 39 states had at least one. TWB is uniquely significant for the breadth of its vision, the inclusive definition of its constituencies, and its longevity; the Cambridge Women’s Center in Massachusetts appears to be the only other 1970s women’s center that is still operating today.

Traditional historic preservation evaluation criteria of “the first, the largest, or the only” aren’t relevant to many sites associated with second-wave feminism. Because the movement was not centralized, its manifestations were dispersed across the United States and occurred primarily at the grassroots level; very few could be described as having a “singular” influence on national history. But places like TWB are powerful embodiments of second-wave feminism—ones that shaped, and were shaped by, the national movement.

Securing the large and well-located building at 3548 18th Street enabled TWB’s founders to create a new type of social, cultural, and political space for feminism and other progressive movements. While some members were concerned that becoming property owners would institutionalize and dilute their radical goals, posing a conflict with their grassroots nature, it is now clear that owning a building could be a radical act in and of itself. Ownership has allowed the organization to stay true to its grassroots commitments, especially now that spiraling rents are squeezing
many of San Francisco’s community organizations out of their facilities. For 40 years, TWB has been an anchor for the social change efforts of women, feminists, LGBTQ people, immigrants, and progressive groups in the Bay Area, acquiring layers of significance as an early laboratory for inclusivity and intersectionality.

DONNA GRAVES is a public historian and urban planner based in Berkeley, California.


2  Women’s history has traditionally been divided into periods, with the suffrage movement called the “first-wave” and the post–World War II women’s movement called “second-wave” feminism. These categories have been rightly criticized as erasing the ongoing struggles for equity by women in the labor movement and women of color in their respective communities.


VIDEO
Learn more about the history and programming of The Women’s Building.