CRITICAL PRACTICE IN AN AGE OF COMPLEXITY - AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CRITIQUE OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

- Paper / Proposal Title: Radical Vulnerability and Design
- Format: verbal presentation
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- Abstract (300 words):

In this presentation, I will explore the concept of ‘radical vulnerability’ and its use in generating socially just design processes. Recent critiques of design thinking and especially design thinking aimed at social innovation, have called on designers to examine their positionality at the outset of a project. A term borrowed from the social sciences, positionality describes the ways a researcher’s insider/outsider position and her ‘race’, gender, and socioeconomic status shape her work. An outsider, in particular an outsider conducting research on marginalized groups, must examine her positional biases so she does not exacerbate the unjust systems she seeks to understand.

Author of, Muddying the Waters: Coauthoring Feminisms Across Scholarship and Activism, Richa Nagar argues that, in the U.S., positionality has become one of the “formulaic ways and categorical terms in which ‘we’ academics often talk about ourselves (2016).” It has become a method for legitimizing rather than challenging expert-led knowledge production. For Nagar, the knowledges needed in struggles for justice are co-produced and describe the researcher’s experiences of co-production:

What is needed instead are stories of building deep relationships and of undertaking long, hard journeys with those who become our ‘research subjects’; stories of how we live, grow, learn, and change in and through those journeys. Sometimes the details of specific events and encounters in these journeys may be
unutterable, or it may be unethical to repeat them; still, the stories of the journeys themselves are valuable knowledge (2016).

How might Nagar’s critique of positionality and concept of radical vulnerability inform design-process, research and criticism? How does Nagar’s concept of radical vulnerability compare to Shibley and Schneekloth’s concept of vulnerable architectural practice (2000)? How do both map against the socially just design thinking approach offered by Staton, Kramer, Gordon, and Valdez (2016)?

**• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):**
Kristine F. Miller is a Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in Landscape Architecture at the University of Minnesota where she teaches courses in urban design, research methods, and design and social equity. She has published two books on design, public space, politics, and identity. She received Harvard University’s Dumbarton Oaks Fellowship to complete research for her first book, *Designs on the Public: The Private Lives of New York's Public Spaces* (UMN Press, 2007), which explores public spaces, not as static entities, but as the constantly changing intersections of physical places, the laws and regulations that govern them, and the people who claim them. Her second book, *Almost Home: The Public Work of Gertrude Jekyll*, (UVA Press, 2013) examines the role of garden design in the development of public space and identity in Britain.

Miller co-founded and co-directs an award-winning long-term community/university partnership called ReMix with Juxtaposition Arts in North Minneapolis. In 2012, she was awarded a Bush Fellowship for her ongoing work on design and equity. Miller holds an undergraduate degree from the University of Toronto’s Trinity College in Humanities and Psychoanalytic Thought, an MLA from Cornell University, and a PhD from the Edinburgh College of Art.