

Jégou, F., 2018. "Is library feminin or masculin?"

Public Policy Design Master Class, FWB & ENSAV

La Cambre





IS LIBRARY FEMININ OR MASCULINE?

What library books were organized by book cover color? Would we then manage to avoid a gender-based classification? Or what if the readers were encouraged to track down gender stereotypes in the books they borrow. Would that generate an educational exhibit? In other words, how could we rethink public libraries so they can play a role in reducing, or at least not further exacerbating gender inequalities? This was the topic tackled in the Public Policies Design masters class mixing MA1 industrial design, interior design and textile students of La Cambre National School of Visual Arts Brussels.

But before we dive in further into the question, let's go back to the project's multi-layered beginning.

GENDER PROJECT...

The Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles has decided to integrate a gender sensitive approach for all of FWB's new policies. It's task is to "gender test" any new public policy before it is approved. Does this new measure respect male-female equality principles? Or on the contrary, is it biased and would actually aggravate inequalities? Beyond these strictly legal matters, will it create new products and services, which foster better living together, more synergy, connivance and finally mutually constructive care between men and woman?

This booklet is based on the paper presenting the collaboration of 1st year master Industrial design, Interior architecture and Textile design students in the course: Ecodesign and Sustainable Development, (professor François Jégou) at ENSAV, La Cambre National School of Visual Arts Brussels with the Gender Support Cell and the Public Reading Service of the Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles, (Brussels' Region Public Services). Oct. 2017 - May 2018.

The names of the students who took part to this course is not disclosed here for privacy reasons of the European General Data Protection Regulation. For further information, please contact the Head of the ENSAV La Cambre at : direction@lacambre.be, www.lacambre.be



GENDER TEST...

The integrative gender sensitive approach consists of “reorganizing, improving, making evolve and evaluating decision-making processes in order to incorporate this male-female equalitarian perspective to all domains and levels, through players generally involved in policy making.” Draft guidance notes, decrees, regulatory orders, circulars, conventions, etc. must be Gender Tested before their inclusion on a Government’s agenda.

This Gender Test is in the form of a 3-part questionnaire:

- _ identification of the respective situation of women and men in the subject concerned, using statistics disaggregated by sex;
- _ Evaluation of the impact of the project on women and men’s equality;
- _ The identification of compensatory measures to propose in the event of a negative impact on the equality of women and men.

The Gender Test represents significant progress in the field of gender inequalities if it is creatively addressed as an opportunity to re-examine our public policies from a gender perspective and to make structural innovations in the field, beyond simple compensatory measures. In this the Gender Test is a beautiful subject for students of La Cambre to try the field of public policy design...

◀ Students in Master 1 Industrial Design, Interior Architecture and Textile Design presenting their ideas related to gender issues and libraries during the course “Ecodesign and Sustainable Development”



PUBLIC READING NETWORK AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES

A beautiful subject but arduous too, which requires a more tangible application project, and also isn't too far from the students' comfort zone. This is where the libraries' theme comes into play with an informal collaboration with the Equal Opportunities Directorate of the Wallonia Brussels Federation in charge of putting the Gender Test into practice and with the FWB' public reading network and libraries have recently been carrying out a Gender Test as part of the reform of one of its decrees.

Two levels of questions are targeted:

If we take libraries as a testing ground, can we re-examine this public service and the policies that govern it and bring new ideas in terms of gender equality?

Based on this library-centric experiment, can we learn lessons for the Gender Test and nurture, inspire the search for compensatory measures through a creative and user-centered design process?

◀ Civil servants from the Gender Support Unit of the Wallonia Brussels Federation take part in the Public Policy Design Course at ENSAV La Cambre.



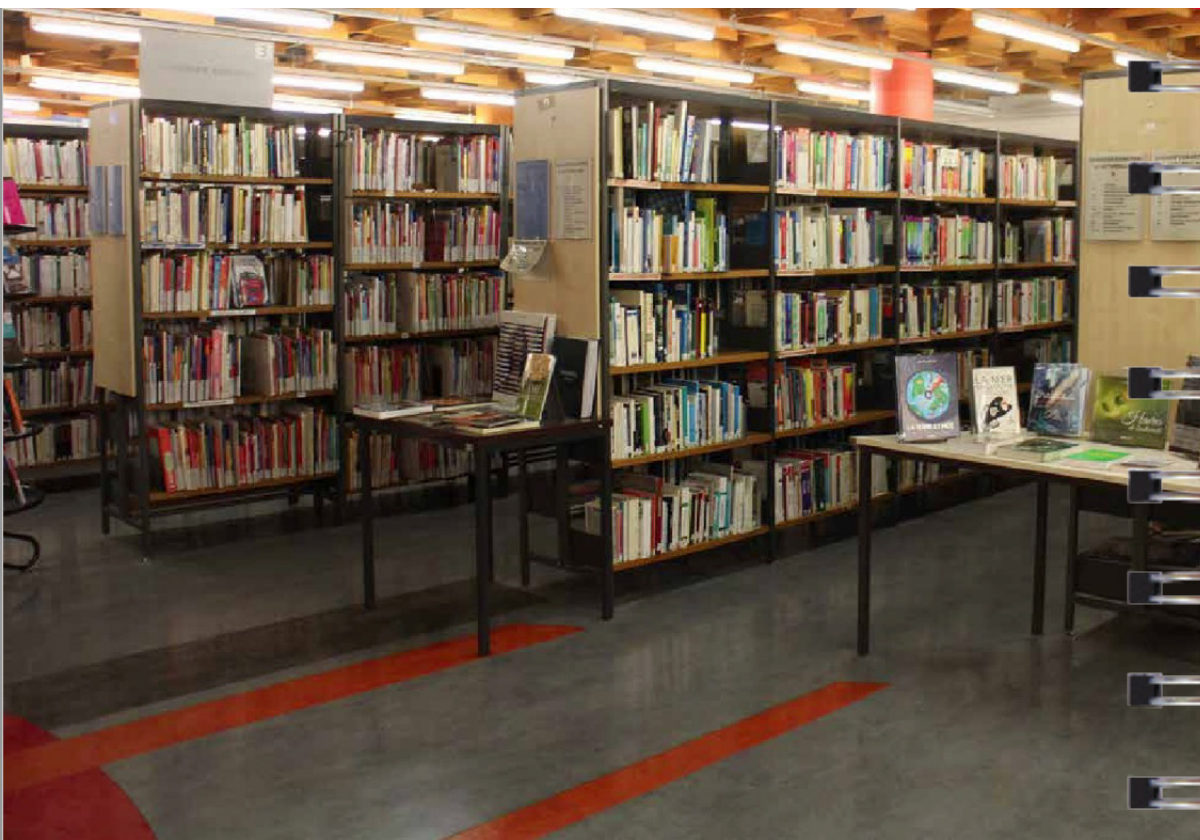
LIBRARY IMMERSION

In concrete terms, the application project is divided into two stages:

- Observation in a library, meeting with librarians and some users in a simple and light way, by asking them questions and by submitting reaction cards prepared in class;
- Co-creation of scenarios between the students and employees of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation participating in the project to stimulate innovation in public libraries from a gender perspective and, if necessary, draw lessons for the Gender Test.

With the help of the FWB's public reading network and libraries, three visits are organized to the large Chiroux library in Liège, to the medium-sized Braine-L'Alleud library and to the BD-bus, an initiative of the Province. Namur, which offers adults and young people only comic books and manga and stops in front of local libraries during one of their opening hours.

Some loose reactions reported from these field visits and this harvest of interviews: "the entrance is majestic but as soon as you go where there are books it is not very engaging"; "A library is kind of the only service where users are welcomed in the back shop and wander in the stock!"



◀ **BDbus, a mobile library set up by the Province of Namur featuring comics and mangas.**

◀ **Libraries are the only public services where customers are welcomed in the storage area.**



On the gender side, exit the pink bins with books for little girls and blue for little boys but some rays using thematic classification remain very gendered in fact. Cooking and sewing in front of masonry and mechanics in the practical life sector! And if we actually start counting the female and male characters on the covers of a sample of the most used youth books, we are not surprised to see many more heroes than heroines without even mentioning if they are princesses or knights...

What about attendance statistics: more or less balanced in the youngest age groups they show a significant imbalance in favor of women at the end of their studies. The tastes diverge, of course: female readers prefer novels, and the few male readers are more interested in comic strips (hence, one of the BD-bus' motivations, which supplements library collections and tries to attract more men).

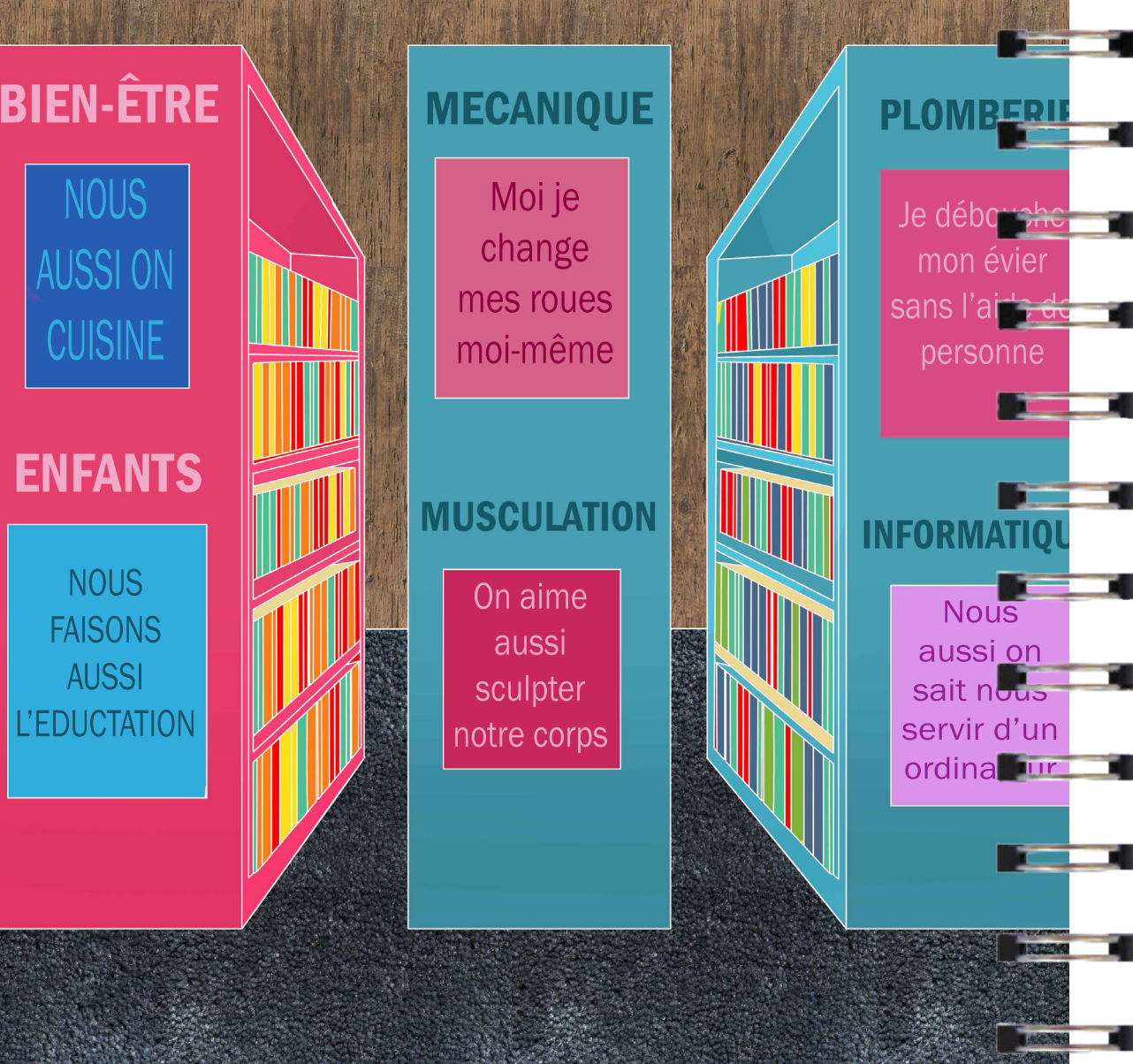
The library staff is also very feminine. On the other hand, there is an overrepresentation of the men authors and little attention of the majority of the publishers to promote women authors. No further training or staff awareness on gender issues.

There are sometimes contradictions between the library's declared attention to respecting the gender balance and a selection of books put forward on a table where there are three times more men authors than women authors.

In short, in library as elsewhere, the inequalities are obvious but few seem to realize it and tackle it seriously. Yet as the third place of culture in terms of attendance, libraries, and by them the taste for reading, are powerful vectors of thought shaping and therefore of fighting against stereotypes.



◀ The selected reading stands and the books on the shelves sometimes reveal a very important imbalance to the detriment of women writers.



Example of a scenario proposed by the students: Expo Genre
Emphasize the stereotypes by putting the feminine rays in pink, and in blue the masculine rays. On the principle of Fluxus placards counter stereotypes, women know how to change a wheel, men cook. The goal is to bring the public to think about gender issues.

SUBJECTIVE GENDER REPORT

With this immersion, the objective of the second phase of the application project is to generate together, students and employees, what we could call a “Gender ‘discovery report’” which includes a series of “Creative Scenarios around gender issues”.

Seven themes emerge from these interactions:

Gender Exhibit

The library organizes events / exhibitions / presentations on gender issues within the books world (eg sexist books selection, the feminine/masculine body throughout the ages, the stereotypes induced by libraries despite themselves etc.)

Educational Kit

The library offers workshops / exercises to raise children’s awareness of gender inequalities conveyed through books (content, authors, role of women / men in stories, editorial choices, choice of collections, etc). .)

Arranging the Debate

The library is a powerful tool for questioning but paradoxically we can not debate because silence is imposed. How can one imagine a library which encourages exchanging ideas, debating in particular on gender equality issues?

Reversed Library

The library is one of the only public places where users wander in the stock (shelving books presented on the slice unattractive classification always easy to use, etc.). Can we imagine a more interesting, engaging library where both women and men feel good?

Il était une fois...

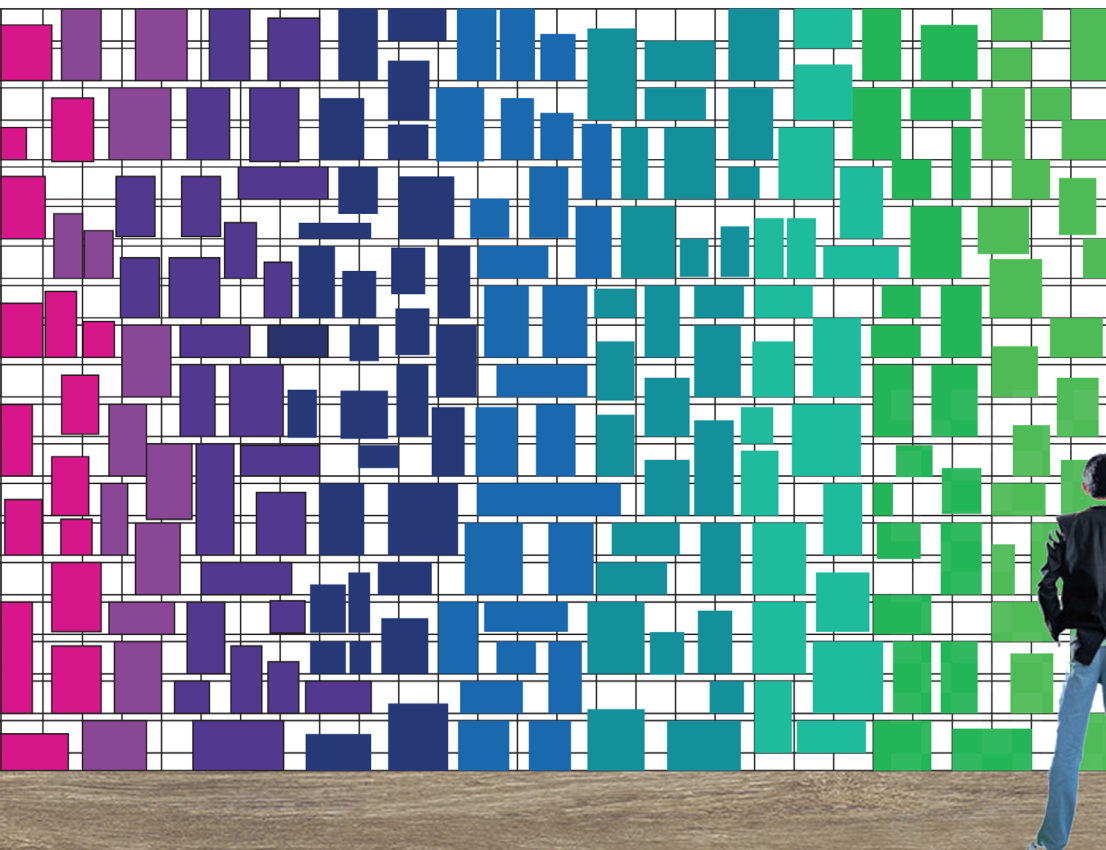
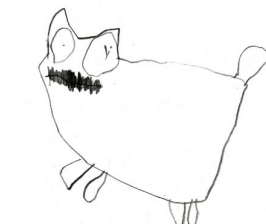
qui rencontrèrent ...

devant leur...

...joue de la musique

ça fait peut à...

...le console.



New Classification

Classification used to be very important in order to find the books on the shelves. In the digital age, other solutions are available. Could we then think of other book organizations, for example, mixing the most popular typologies for women, for men?

Absurd Exhibit

Presenting the books which convey stereotypes in order to expose these gender absurdities. The scenography should accentuate the ironical tone of the exhibit.

4.0 Library

What will the library be like in a digital, multimedia, connected age, etc.? (what roles, uses?) and how could this new library contribute to more equality between women and men?

Awareness Training

The library staff provide informal public education. They must then, among other things, be attentive to gender issues. What kind of awareness raising / training could one imagine to engage the staff in being more careful on a daily basis?

WHAT TEACHINGS CAN WE DRAW OUT FOR THE GENDER TEST?

Both the Public Reading Network and public libraries and the Equal Opportunities Directorate of the FWB have been successful. But even if this experiment covers only about ten hours and about fifteen students, it is unfortunately not

◀ Example of a scenario proposed by the students: Educational Kit
During participatory workshops children write new books. Using rebus or cadavre exquis techniques, they draw spontaneous stories, thus inventing genderless scenarios.

◀ Example of a scenario proposed by the students: "Colors" classification
With this new classification, books are no longer organized by alphabetical order or author but rather by color! All styles are mixed together. So there would no longer be any gender or author based biases. Only a short summary would appear on the back. One would now choose books "blindly".



possible to devote such a force of striking field investigation and creativity for all the tests Gender that the FWB must operate.

During the work sessions between the employees and designers, discussion circles were organized. During the finale exhibit in particular, these circles included members of the public reading department, the Department for Equal Chances and the students.

These circles were very effective. In limited time they went beyond the surveying and project ideas to investigating even further, asking questions, taking a step aside and generating new ideas which could stir-up new things

The ideas are fresh, some times out of the box; other times unrealistic but others are quite doable for FWB or the libraries themselves.

Whether it's an incentive action engaging users and librarians to co-elaborate and start with readings highlighting gender stereotypes in an exhibit, or organizing debate with an apéro, or educational animations revisiting collections with a critical view point, or even reconfiguring part of the furniture setting to give more space to theme selections rather than the stock...

Theses circles would take place before or while the Gender Test would take place and their purpose would be to feed/stimulate/challenge someone in charge of suggesting compensatory measures, or even help enrich this new public policy.

◀ **Example of a scenario proposed by the students: Absurd exhibit**
This exhibit presents books which convey gender-related stereotypes in order to call out the absurdity of it. The space should highlight the ironical tone of the exhibit.

◀ **Example of a scenario proposed by the students: A more playful library**
where books have more space because they are partitions, tables, walls ... The themes put forward by the library as the gender issues are more visible.



WHAT SEEMS ACTIONNABLE AND HOW COULD IT BE EXECUTED?

The projects presented to te the Public Reading Network and public libraries members were quite appealing, even inspiring! Some where unfortunately impossible or to expensive.

But others, were perfectly executable and worth a shot, such as these :

- _ Elaborating an exhibit show-casing gender inequality “absurdities” in which users could take part in ;
- _ Setting up educational kits for both children and teenagers ;
- _ Rearranging part of the facilities by highlighting both stereotypes and answers given in selected rays
- _ integrating a gender training in the half-yearly training schedule offered to public reading operators
- _ debating over an apéro organized by the library
- _ more digital use

Now, The the Public Reading Network and public libraries will start engaging in a reflection process to gage what can be done on the short- mid- and long-term with regard to this crucial theme.

Véronique Leroy, Director a.i. Service de la Lecture publique, Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles



HOW CAN ONE HARBOR THE GENDER TEST?

This project has comforted the Public Reading Network and public libraries's belief that the Gender Test can be used to detect active gender dynamics within a sector, raise awareness within the unit in charge of the sector, and invite simple measures to be taken as a fighting response to inequalities resulting from these dynamics.

Far from being a formality, the Gender Test can be a vector of significant social change regarding male-female equality. In order for that to happen, the test must be consciously done, and given time for reflection: compensatory measures regarding unfair dynamics cannot be imagined within a few minutes. They require some time for reflection and discussion in order to bear fruit.

Of course, work of such magnitude isn't achievable for every aspect of the Gender Test and quite likely unnecessary for most of the FWB's policies. However, for policies and major reform projects, it would be best to think about whether or not it is necessary to spend time thinking about the gender dynamics within those policies.

Working upstream (before the policy's elaboration phase) and taking time to reflect upon on what measures would gather the necessary conditions for the decree of January 6th 2017's to be truly effective.

Adeline Cornet, Coordination of the Gender Support Cell, Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles





