

Editorial

Feminist Spatial Practices for Social Equality

Maria Silvia D'Avolio ^{1*} , Andri Gerber ²

¹ Independent Researcher, ITALY

² Zurich University of Applied Sciences, SWITZERLAND

*Corresponding Author: marias.davolio@outlook.com

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In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in the social and ethical implications of planning and designing the built environment from scholarly and practice-based perspectives. These reflections are led by an intersectional approach that considers questions of how patriarchal, capitalist and colonial systems affect participation in the construction of the world that everyone inhabits, and how the current system can be questioned and challenged.

Furthermore, there has been a growing interest in questioning the use of 'architecture' as a term that suggests the commodification of architecture by emphasising the connection between the profession and the built environment, and in looking for alternatives. The term 'spatial' has been considered an alternative as it includes the dynamic context of social space (Awan et al., 2011). Rendell (2011) introduces the concept of critical spatial practice to blur the binaries of theory/practice and private/public, an approach later developed under the umbrella term of feminist spatial practices. The intention of feminist practices to function as 'political acts that challenge the status quo and identified relationships of power' emphasises the purpose of disrupting binaries and hegemonic systems (Brown, 2011, p. 367).

A further aspect to consider about this approach is that spatial practice is a social practice, which is cultural rather than individual, therefore it develops 'patterns of action, which the individual participates in, and through which values are both performed and reaffirmed' (Petrescu & Trogal, 2017, p. 40). This highlights the importance of disrupting the reliance on individual and hegemonic performances, narratives, and expectations. A question raised in literature and discussed by some of the papers present in this special issue is whether this disruption can only be implemented from outside institutions, or if working within the institution can play a role in reforming the system from within. However, there is a shared agreement on the need to broaden the concept of 'practice'. Rather than understanding it as merely the design and production of buildings and urban spaces, it should also be considered in terms of reception, use, and occupation, as well as the analysis of users' embodied experiences and how it is described in writing and in other forms of representation and documentation (Rendell, 2011). There is an extensive body of scholarship by feminist thinkers, scholars, and activists that is essential to mention in relation to these discussions and topics. However, since this text is a short editorial, we have decided to keep references to a minimum. The articles included in this volume will introduce the solid foundation of literature that has allowed us, the guest editors, and the authors of the following papers to participate in the ongoing debate.

Our interest to include interdisciplinary contributions to this growing debate led us to develop this special issue, which found a special home in Feminist Encounters that, with its interdisciplinary focus and the interest on both historical and contemporary topics and praxis, was the perfect fit for this issue. This volume has a long genesis that started with a conference that we held at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW) in Winterthur (CH) in June 2024. The title of the conference was Women designing and planning for social equality - A political

and feminist reading of practitioners' commitment to rethink practice, question theory and take space. The aim of the one-day conference was to explore the ways in which women in spatial practices initiated or have been involved in rethinking practice, questioning theory, and taking space. As a result, their positionality as women and their political commitment guided their praxis towards fostering social participation and improving the everyday life of those usually inhabiting the margins of society. The intent was to focus mostly on the gender dimension of these reflections. However, while attending the conference and discussing the papers presented during the day, it became clear that these reflections were a good starting point for a wider conversation, more focused on the aims and the social commitment of the practices rather than on the gender dimension of who was implementing them. Therefore, the aim of the edited collection of contributions gathered in this issue is not to offer biographical accounts of women in the profession, to demonstrate their absence and its material implications, or to mention their participation merely because of their gender. Rather, the collection engages with the increasing interest in understanding how practitioners' positionality in society influenced their work. And as the main aim of these practices is to question the status quo of the discipline from a feminist, anticapitalist and decolonial perspective, the positionality explored is that of people usually inhabiting the margins of the spatial practices.

In this special issue we included papers that address reflections, discussions, examples, or other aspects that illustrate the social and political responsibility held by practitioners in the built environment. The following articles employ various theories, such as social reproduction and intersectionality, illustrate historical and contemporary examples, and propose innovative methodological frameworks. They explore various aspects analysed at different scales: domestic, local, and urban. Among many key concepts, contributions in the special issue question how practitioners engaged in spatial practices took/are taking a stance in confronting gender bias in the places of social reproduction, develop an interdisciplinary approach towards the concept of 'care' to illustrate its role in the praxis employed by practitioners in architecture and planning, consider the implications of being at the margins of history and the discourse of architectural practice, help questioning the concept of 'archive', and offer alternative readings of the past and the present where interpersonal relationships, in particular gendered ones, hold a fundamental role in the definition of design and planning disciplines.

We organised this issue into three main sections, namely critical analysis and activism, examples of historical case studies, and narrative as a method of analysis. However, the categories are not rigidly defined and overlap significantly.

PART 1 - CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND ACTIVISM

The first part of the issue takes a critical look at various aspects of feminist spatial practices. The four papers challenge assumptions behind what is considered 'good practice' and emphasise the need for a radical rethink of the meaning and potential of feminist spatial practice within a system that is still too deeply rooted in capitalist, patriarchal and colonial structures. The papers are aligned in their view that architecture is an ongoing, relational process with the capacity to influence power dynamics. As architecture is not neutral, its potential can be employed through practices of care to promote participation, inclusivity and cooperation.

Fatemeh Mahmoudnejad disputes the idea that co-design participation is inherently inclusive. The article is based on a study conducted in Scotland that aimed to demonstrate how the diverse backgrounds of participants can influence their access to, and therefore their inclusion in, the process. It advocates the development of transformative participation by acknowledging the relationship between diversity and the complex, relational power dynamics at work in participatory practices. The author's innovative approach lies in the suggestion that intersectional feminist perspectives can capture the relational and situational ways in which exclusion occurs in practice. Mahmoudnejad achieves this by applying an intersectional approach at three levels — intracategorical, anticategorical, and intercategorical — to explore relational complexities and identify participation gaps in underrepresented communities.

Cini Boeri's Domestic Project is a device that Carlotta Cossutta employs to exemplify the radical possibilities offered by feminist critiques of domesticity in rethinking spatial design. In her paper, which builds on the tradition of 1970s Italian feminism that conceptualised the home as a site of political conflict, Cossutta draws on the theoretical underpinnings of social reproduction to explore the relationship between domestic space and the formation of the family as a social institution. The paper aims to demonstrate the importance of spatial critique in redefining social norms, as the author herself explains: 'Boeri's proposal illuminated how domestic design encodes social norms of intimacy, gender, and labour, and how architecture can challenge them'. Even readers not usually familiar with architectural drawings would appreciate Boeri's innovative house plan, which is still visionary 40 years later.

Zuzana Tabackova and Lydia Greeakova reflect on the meaning of feminist spatial practices, aiming to expand the definition to include practitioners who do not necessarily identify their work as such, often because they are not familiar with the discourse. Through analysing the work of 21 organisations in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the authors argue that feminist spatial practice should be redefined as 'situated, interdisciplinary, multi-

scalar and oriented towards care and empowerment'. Furthermore, their reflections challenge the assumption in feminist discourse that alternative methodologies are essential to feminist spatial practice ('doing architecture otherwise'). Instead, they argue that the analysed practitioners manage to create 'good' spaces while also using mainstream methods. The site-specific analysis offers insights into a relatively unexplored post-socialist location, and the authors' familiarity with the context enables them to provide in-depth reflections and observations.

The following article adopts the same framework that views queer-feminist spatial practices as a form of action aimed at destabilising spatial order. This praxis can transcend the boundaries of the architectural profession and self-defined feminist collectives. In particular, Natalie Novik argues that commoning, through craft and maintenance, is an ongoing process that shares resources, knowledge, and spaces through mutual care and cooperation. This argument is exemplified by the case study of Not Quite, a collective of artists and craftspeople based in rural Sweden. The key concepts behind these practices are degrowth and maintenance. These are intended not only to move beyond the capitalist economic system, but also to promote a societal transformation based on care politics. The article also reflects methodologically on the use of practice as a mode of enquiry, and the author's familiarity with the collective under investigation enables the adoption of 'an embodied, situated way of thinking that produces understanding through doing'.

PART 2 - HISTORICAL CASE STUDIES

In recent decades, many different disciplines have reflected on the question: What can we learn from history if it has been written by men and the voices of women have been marginalised? The second part of the issue explores how history can be rewritten and revisited by examining overlooked sources, such as manuals and magazines, and how these sources can reshape dominant narratives. There are many examples of how women have established and designed new social spaces and introduced new spatial practices. The following papers illustrate some of these examples.

In her essay, Pía Montealegre approaches the history of institutional spaces in South America, through the medium of photography. Through these black-and-white, often blurred photographic documents depicting children and adults in institutions such as hospitals and orphanages, she identifies aspects that often escape historical analysis and written documents: the architectural agency of homemaking and the moments of joy it brings to these spaces of care. The photographs unveil homemaking and programming, activities which often escape historical depiction. They also reveal how these activities counteract Foucauldian spaces of power and control. Small domestic gestures can thus become subtle forms of architectural agency revealed only by photographs. Montealegre warns about how women not only introduced care and joy but also contributed to the reinforcement of gender and class stereotypes. These examples are not least noteworthy as they anticipate current reflections on spaces of well-being and care.

In the wake of industrialisation, a new social category emerged: single working women, for which new forms of living were needed, but they were not available. In the context of the emergence of this new class and the struggles it had to face, the difficulties it endured in its quest for emancipation and visibility, three different *Ledigenheime* in Germany, Switzerland, and England are presented by Jana von Wyl in her essay. These were tentative responses to the problem of 'surplus women' and attempts to find adequate architectural solutions. The three case studies illustrate different backgrounds, conditions, typologies, and architectures, as well as different attitudes toward women. However, they all share an attempt to overcome the existing gendered spatial division at the levels of cities and buildings and to emancipate women. Although the *Ledigenheim* typology and reformist impetus did not continue after the war, they stand as potential models that challenge dominant narratives. As such, they should be considered precursors of new forms of spatial organisation.

In the following article, Tara Bissett takes a close look at a specific medium — feminist manuals and catalogues — that were introduced in women's centres in North American cities as alternative forms of knowledge. Examining these manuals and catalogues raises the question of how they transferred knowledge and contested established epistemologies. Rather than being considered written sources, they are viewed as scores and notations that allowed for social transformation and could be repeated in different forms and times. This brings these manuals and catalogues closer to performance art, calling for a different perspective, which Bissett finds in Nelson's Goodman notion of allographic art. The result is a set of procedural forms that challenge the established conception of architectural production and labour. These manuals and catalogues enabled the circulation of knowledge within the women's centres, thereby creating new channels of knowledge outside of established structures. Classic forms of authorship are then questioned, and new collective forms of knowledge are established.

Henriette Steiner and Svava Riesto encourage readers to reconsider traditional perceptions of urban squatters in Copenhagen. They present a more nuanced narrative in which women play pivotal roles in both the squatting movement and the establishment. To lay out more in depth the roles and the possibilities of both sides and demonstrate the extent to which the squatters were not merely victims of the system they opposed, Steiner and Riesto refer to Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital. Through this concept, they argue that the squatters

were far from 'innocent' but rather actively sought to exploit their cultural capital for their cause. On the other side was Edel Saunte, a feminist politician who opposed the project from the city council's perspective. While both sides fought to improve living conditions, Saunte questioned living in condemned buildings as a form of social injustice, while the squatters saw it as a way to reinvent traditional forms of households. Thus, depending on one's perspective and the narrative that was developed around the issue, one side or the other was 'wrong', though both represent important positions toward social justice.

In the last paper, Alex Banister discusses the potential of women's magazines in interwar England to look beyond stereotypes and present multiple ways modern women could live. Looking specifically at the magazine *Good Housekeeping*, Banister demonstrates that it was more than just a magazine; it was a network. Alice Maud acted as Managing Director and enabled many women to become authors. Together, they promoted an alternative image of women and households to the dominant narrative. This enabled them to challenge norms and conventions and to promote alternative role models for their readers beyond stereotypes through the means of the home and its design. Specifically, it promoted new living arrangements for 'bachelor girls,' as professional single women were called, and suggested new forms of co-living. With an initial distribution of 150'000 copies, *Good Housekeeping's* influence cannot be underestimated. It is an invaluable lens through which to understand the transformation of women's status and changes in family dynamics between the wars.

PART 3 - NARRATIVE AS A METHOD

The third and final part of the special issue explores narrative as a method through which the researcher's subjectivity becomes an epistemic source. The papers in this section emphasise the significance of the body in methodology by situating the researcher's body and their interpersonal encounters within a context of relationality with the surrounding space. These approaches make the research method dynamic and situated within the context and the bodies, rather than static and universal. They also converse with the extensive, interdisciplinary corpus of work by feminist scholars who consider the body as a site of knowledge production. The following papers employ positionality and autoethnography through innovative approaches aimed at destabilising more traditional methods.

Through the employment of a compelling methodological approach, Elena Rieger connects her personal experiences with those of Emilie von Berlepsch, offering a critical reflection on the dual aspect of comfort/discomfort. By following the footsteps of the German writer on her travels in Scotland in 1800, the author questions the role of the architecture historian from a bodily perspective. Her richly descriptive anecdotes draw the reader into her sense of discomfort, a concept she seamlessly weaves onto the politics of space, granting it epistemic value. The connection between historical analysis and creative writing makes affective anecdotes a unique and personal methodological approach, capable of challenging the expectations of the 'disembodied researcher' and considering it instead a 'body-in-situation' (Young, 2005).

The objective of Fatma Mhmood's article is to expand the discourse on ecofeminism beyond the pitfalls of essentialism by employing an intersectional framework. By reflecting on women's gaze towards the landscape of the United Arab Emirates' nature from an insider perspective, the author proposes an approach able to problematise the traditional narrative by starting from women's experiences within urban and non-urban spaces. Nature, therefore, becomes experienced rather than seen. As experiences acknowledge positionality and diversity, this method allows to disrupt binary spatial categories. By situating her analysis within the paradigm of postcolonial Middle Eastern feminist studies and drawing from a substantial array of shared memories, Mhmood demonstrates that the relationship to the land transcends the visual and diverges from orientalist narratives.

The following article presents a fascinating 'intra-disciplinary' methodological proposal that combines and 'inhabits' both theoretical and practice-based approaches from dance and urban studies. Through their respective engagement with these disciplines, Adesola Akinleye and Elahe Karimnia develop a method of using dance to understand the experience of being present in the city. The method and language of the article are both original, offering a sense of constant movement and novel ways of experiencing the text - 'dance is to urban-journeying, as poetry is to text'. One of the aims of the proposed tentacular-feminine-body methodology is to reconsider the notion of city archives as static entities, instead suggesting their constant metamorphosis, which is derived from the dynamic, relational encounters that occur daily in urban space.

Xin Li proposes an extensive reading of feminist spatial practice theory developed by Chinese scholars, exemplifying the particularities of Chinese urban environments and emphasising the importance of developing a context-specific theoretical framework. The author develops the concept of carrying in terms of care politics, using it as both a conceptual lens and research framework through which to examine the relational dynamics between bodies, objects, and urban space. In her ethnographic account, Xin Li explores the material acts of carrying performed by gendered bodies in a residential neighbourhood in Beijing. She demonstrates how essential acts that foreground the four fundamental aspects of living - clothing, food, dwelling, and transport - sustain urban life. Drawing on critical urban theory, the author illustrates how the concept of carrying destabilises rigid dualities (e.g.

public/private, productive/reproductive) in order to support the idea that the body is a dynamic site of spatial production.

Building on the understanding established in previous papers in this section, which views the body as a source of knowledge, Uğur Sarışen's article queers autoethnography by incorporating 'accounts of non-linear and interruptive queer temporalities that unsettle normative chronologies'. The author's writing is crumbly, taking its form from ruins and allowing the reader to fill the gaps with their own positionality in relation to the text - it is refreshing to see that it is possible to find 'ways to exist within a normative system of academic production'. Although seemingly based on an ephemeral, fractured ontology of ruins, the article is firmly rooted in solid theoretical and methodological foundations. Through the use of autoethnography and autotheory, the author reflects on how space relates to justice by situating his queerness within ruins and questioning concepts such as knowledge, truth, and power.

BOOK REVIEW

The special issue also includes a review of the book *Reconfiguring Spatial Practices Through Dance: Collaborative Processes of Being-With in Dance, Architecture and Engineering* by Adesola Akinleye. Prof. Akinleye also contributed to this issue with an article proposing an interdisciplinary methodology for dance and urban planning. In his review, Jeremy Hahn offers a clear analysis of how the artist and scholar Adesola Akinleye develops a holistic framework as praxis, effectively commenting on the various means employed in the text's chapters - essays, poems, and interviews - through philosophical concepts and methodological reflections. Through a clever use of language, he enables dancing terminology to illustrate the innovative practices developed by Akinleye. Hahn pinpoints examples of how the author's methodological framework engages with philosophical themes to explain the intricate relationship between dance practice and the creation of the built environment.

CONCLUSION

While reading the articles that comprise this special issue, we realized that we were entering a communal space that goes beyond the singular written page. This is evident from the recurring key references, both from disciplines related to the built environment and from beyond - see for example Sara Ahmed, Iris Marion Young and Silvia Federici, all cited in many articles. This communal space is also evident in the use of theories that build up from one author to another, creating a solid foundation for this collective discussion. A shared ferment is perceived in the texts: an inner need to question uncritical and traditional methodologies, to reflect on the positionality of the researcher, to conceptualise embodiment within the built environment, to build communities through the employment of care politics, and to challenge dominant ways of writing history, reading sources and creating archives.

We were fortunate to have the opportunity to collaboratively create this issue with the authors, editors, and reviewers. We never took for granted the time and care they invested in this project. We are truly grateful and would like to thank you all very much. This issue positions itself within a longitudinal, interdisciplinary discussion of this topic that began before us and is already evolving. We would like to acknowledge and express our gratitude to all feminist thinkers, scholars, and activists who have enabled us to begin the conversation from this point.

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Author contributions

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N/A

AI disclosure

No generative artificial intelligence tools were used to prepare or write this manuscript. AI-based tools (DeepL) were only used to help ensure the text was grammatically correct during the revision process. The authors retain full responsibility for its content.

Biographical sketch

Maria Silvia D'Avolio is a postdoctoral researcher with interdisciplinary training and professional experience in architecture, sociology, and gender studies. She holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Sussex (UK). She has worked as a researcher at various international universities and had taught sociology, criminology and gender studies in the UK at the University of Sussex and the University of Brighton. Her research analyses intersecting inequalities from a feminist perspective, in the fields of architecture and the social sciences.

Andri Gerber is an architect and co-head of the Institute of Constructive Design at ZHAW in Winterthur. He holds a PhD (awarded with an ETH medal) and a habilitation (founded by an SNF Ambizione grant) from ETH. His recent interests revolve around the potential of analogue and digital games to address and convey architectural and urban subjects connected to sustainability. He is currently working on an SNF-founded project on the history of ecological architecture in Switzerland.

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