



URBANISM AND GENDER: A NECESSARY VISION FOR ALL

Barcelona Thursday 28th April
Equipment: daily infrastructures



Gender Sensitive Urban Planning

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I. Introduction

When looking at cities from a gender perspective one of the main gender differences that effect the use of urban space is the difference between men and women in care-giving roles and responsibilities. Due to an almost universal gender specific division of labor, it is mostly women who take on the majority of care work and reproductive tasks in families and communities. As such women are central to urban planning and development as they are both key users of the city in their role as managers of everyday life as well as key producers of residential environments in their role as community leaders and initiators of neighborhood and community networks.

From this perspective the design of urban living environments and infrastructures take on radically different priorities. Many of the past and present trends in urban development reflect the perspective of male life-styles and role models based on an 'outsourcing' of care giving tasks to the 'other sex'. Just like there is a difference in perspective if the focus in urban planning is on planning houses or on planning homes, there is a shift between the hardware and the software of space when looking at entire cities from a gender perspective.

In the following we summarise some basic principles that can inform urban planning in the process of developing or redesigning cities to be more gender sensitive , inclusive and more responsive towards the needs of the whole citizenship.

II. Principles of Gender Sensitive Urban Planning

Reclaiming Public Space for Everyday Life

Decades of a sectoral approach in urban planning has led to segregated urban environments where residential, work, shopping and leisure environments constitute separate spheres linked by extensive transportation systems. In this approach traffic has become dominant, relegating all other functions to compressed and de-linked pockets of life amidst high-tech urban hardware.

From the perspective of caregivers dealing simultaneously with all the aspects of everyday life the technocratic efficiency of mono-cultural urban environments is counterproductive. Women need multifunctional urban spaces to match the balancing of their multi-tasking daily realities. Complete neighborhoods of mixed use with short distances and synchronised timing of services and infrastructures, proximity of work, childcare, shops and public services as well as safe, frequent and easily accessible public transport systems constitute the elements of a city that fits the needs of women.

The City is for All

The structures of public space have become more and more excluding of inhabitants with low mobility, like children, the elderly, the disabled. Such groups are marginalised and relegated to specialised spaces like care centers or special events, which specifically target their needs. In the rest of society, they are basically structurally unwelcome. Mobility and a 'footloose' society have created residential environments that become anonymous to the degree that inhabitants seek and live their social networks elsewhere. This happens even to the extent of de-linking communication and social interaction from physical presence and face to face contact, via modern technology and the internet. Children and other dependents are the ones most vulnerable to a society that has de-linked social contacts and social networks from neighborhoods and urban space.



Mono-functional urban planning contributes to the compartmentalization and segmentation among generations in contemporary society. Homogeneous neighborhoods generate mobility. People go elsewhere for the various functions in their lives. Aside from the fact that mobility is a time and energy consuming way of life, urban environments that depend increasingly on mobility, structurally exclude all groups that are less mobile.

Traffic has made it too dangerous for children to play on the streets, the scope in which they can autonomously explore their own environment is becoming increasingly limited. They increasingly become dependent on adults to chauffeur them around to those 'islands' in society catering to their needs like playgrounds or entertainment parks .

As residential neighborhoods and their inhabitants grow older and less mobile, homogeneity becomes a problem. In view of the demographic challenges of an aging society diverse neighborhoods in terms of population, age and functions are better equipped to suit the needs of what is soon to become the majority of the population.

The Power of Presence

Neighborhoods that are sustainable, have a mix of population in terms of different kinds of interests and needs as well as in terms of the kind of assets, or 'capital' that residents have to contribute to their neighborhood. This capital includes time, care, skills, social and cultural capital as well as money. Gentrification approaches that focus only on monetary resources risk creating monocultural environments in terms of the kind of capital present in the neighborhood. A common criticism of newly built or redeveloped settlements is that they are beautiful, but dead. Their inhabitants spend a lot of their time outside the neighborhood. These neighborhoods lack presence.

In order for neighborhoods to be safe and lively they depend on people who are able and willing to invest time, energy, creativity, their presence and their social networks locally. For neighborhoods to be safe and supportive environments for children and other dependents, neighbors need to know and watch out for each other and feel a basic responsibility for their environment. There needs to be social cohesion and presence. This is no longer a given. It takes conscious efforts and policies to reconstruct this kind of quality in our urban environments. Different kinds of people in different phases of their lives have different things to offer each other and their neighborhoods. From this perspective urban planning needs to focus on providing structures and opportunities for a local exchange of different forms of capital in neighborhoods and settlements.

The Importance of the Local

Creating cities that are inclusive of all and targeted towards the requirements of female life styles involves a reevaluation and reclaiming of the local in urban development, in terms of spatial use, neighborhood and community development, civic engagement, integration, as well as in terms of a local economy.

We are living in times of rapid social and demographic changes. Families are shrinking to small and smaller units, one person households are increasing, more and more elder persons are falling out of family and kin care systems. Traditional social networks that have weaved the social tissue of society like extended families, religious communities or charity organisations are losing ground which creates the need for new forms of creating community and social



cohesion. The local social and spatial dimension carries an important potential for the development of such new forms of social solidarity and social networks.

The rapid spreading of the Mother Center movement shows a historic need for community support and a widening of the social space in regard to family and parenting tasks. The proverbial expression in Africa that “It takes a village to raise a child” is a striking summary of the approach that bringing up the next generation is a task that goes well beyond the settings of nuclear families. The local comprises a bridging function between private and public, between the informal and the formal which lends itself well to care-giving tasks. Local neighborhood networks create qualities of ‘a village in the city’, create opportunities to spread care-giving tasks for children as well as for the elderly over a larger group, thus both providing support and relief to family care-givers as well as maintaining the quality of family like care. The local provides the dimension for visions of multigenerational living that can enclose new concepts of care and close to home services that avoid the limitations of institutionalised care systems while placing aging in a community setting that allows for continuity both in familiarity of location and living environment as well as in social relations.

Re-integrating the Culture of Care into Public Life

Opening up nuclear family structures to local support networks in the neighborhood brings a shift towards more collective responsibility and organisation of reproductive tasks and a reintegration of care into public life. This also opens up potential for shifting the gender division and burden of care work. From studies in family and parental self help initiatives we know that men tend to get more easily involved in family tasks when they are ‘socialised’ in a more public and collective setting.

Public space in the context of family and neighborhood networks stays personal, while at the same time giving access to public recognition and visibility. Mother Centers as self managed local meeting spaces for families and children in the neighborhood have been called ‘public living rooms’, as a way to describe this quality. Children experience an introduction and integration into public life in a protected environment, elderly remain visible participants of society and part of the community.

Local neighborhoods are turntables and switchboards for the exchange of information, local culture and local knowledge. They can create intermediation and buffer zones for many of the challenges of contemporary society including individualisation, alienation, isolation and clientelisation.

Civic Engagement and Integration

The local also plays a role in the generation of civic participation and integration. When public space in neighborhoods is designed to support contact and communication they provide natural places where people can meet, get to know each other and create common understanding as well as common activities. Small scaled physical and social space supports the generation of mutual support networks as well as civic participation. The informality and familiarity of local public space enables citizens to actively contribute their skills and resources and participate in local governance to a greater extent than within the larger scaled and more formalised channels and structures of public life. Often it is women who are most active on the smaller scaled community level.

Integration and social cohesion on the level of local neighborhoods is also key to diversity management and creating social peace. In times where migration has ceased to be primarily



labor market oriented, the work world cannot function as primary location for cultural orientation and integration. It is in the neighborhoods and local living environments that migrants coming to host countries as refugees or as spouses experience the host country and are exposed to local culture and local institutions, very often in connection with their children. The local therefore has a great importance for integration, especially in regard to women.

Local Economy

Industrialisation and productivity orientation have created a duality between a highly productive labor force working ever longer hours and those excluded from the labor market, causing issues of polarisation and social exclusion. Reviving the dimension of local economies can have an important role in bridging this gap. Local economy systems can make use of and validate all resources in the community, regardless of their level of productivity or level of formalised qualification. This creates opportunities for the validation of informal work, and work in the informal sector, Especially for women, who contribute enormous amounts of unpaid work, this opens up interesting perspectives.

Localising social and economic development can also contribute to the up-grading of neighborhoods. A neighborhood developed by the inhabitants is a very local product. It has a local identity. And whatever the identity is, it is different from standard and different from other towns. It differs from anything good designers and urban planners will come up with on their own. Being different, having a local identity and profile is something that is increasingly influential in the image of neighborhoods, something that plays an increasing role in establishing real estate value, an argument well understood by developers.

III. Urban Development from the Bottom up

Neighborhood Initiatives – the Example of the Mother Centers

Mother Centers are a grassroots self-help movement originating in Germany and spreading to 15 countries in the last two decades. In the centers women join forces to improve the life of their families and communities, connect with families from different social and cultural backgrounds, claim public space and acknowledgment for their everyday life expertise, and participate in local governance. They function as focal point for the development of close to home services like childcare, eldercare, meal services, janitor services, second hand shops, toy libraries and as such provide an animated meeting point in the neighborhood. To date more than 750 Mother Centers exist worldwide. They recreate family and neighborhood structures where they have been weakened by modernization, (Western Europe, North America), by socialist regimes (Czech Republic, Bulgaria), by war (Bosnia, Rwanda), by poverty and aids (Kenya) or by migration (Philippines).

The Mother Centers International Network (**mine**) connects and supports the 750 Mother Centers currently existing in 15 countries. (www.mine.cc). **mine** has been accredited as 'Best Practice' by UN Habitat and won the Dubai International Award for Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment. This international recognition was given to mine for "the strengthening of the capacity of civil society to revitalize local neighborhoods and revive community life."



Women and Child Friendly Cities

One of the major learnings of the Mother Center Movement is that it takes more than parents to raise children. It takes a supportive and accommodating environment. Children and parents need family friendly environments not only inside but also outside the walls of their homes and not only inside but also outside the walls of Mother Centers. One of the advocacy issues Mother Centers engage in, in this respect concerns creating women and child friendly cities.

In a study commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning¹ we have endeavored to up-scale the elements of Mother Centers to whole settlements and to city planning as a whole. The focus of this study is on finding ways for social structures to precede the physical in city extension and urban renewal development projects and to stimulate civic involvement and ownership of the urban environment in times where public space is increasingly taken over by market forces. Planners and developers look at urban development mainly in terms of investments and in terms of designing, building and selling houses. Social cohesion and community are hardly part of the process. The Nest! Approach aims at reconciling the social and the physical in urban planning by designing community building as integral part of urban planning and social cohesion as integral part of economic development.

The Learning City

Cities work the best when the knowledge, resources and skills of all residents enter and inform public decision making. Not just the hardware and the software of urban space need to be shaped with a gender perspective continuously at the forefront, this is especially the case with the so called 'orgware' how the process is organized.

The best plans are made when those with the primary interest – the inhabitants – develop them, when neighborhoods develop from a community process, rather than as an engineering product from a drafting table. Women tend to spend more time in homes and communities than men. Based on their everyday experience they develop a keen knowledge of what is needed in the built environment and in the design of public space, infrastructure and services to meet the needs of all members of the community. In order for this knowledge to be mobilized and made productive for governance and development neighborhoods and municipalities must find ways of organizing themselves as learning organizations. They must create a framework and opportunities for the active participation of inhabitants in the development of their neighborhoods and their cities. They must create an enabling environment for the identification and assessment of local knowledge and competencies as well as for the linking of informal and formal knowledge.

mine has developed the concept of Neighborhood Academies as a learning and knowledge building methodology that generates community participation and involvement, by organizing neighborhoods as learning communities. The Academy has both an internally oriented task of structuring internal communication and community building as well as an external task of partnership building and linking to public decision making. (www.nest.cc)

New Approaches to Governance

In urban centers blockages in urban development are often not caused by institutional weakness, but rather by the contrary. In the Netherlands for example it is exactly because of the strength and success of formal planning that there is an institutional blindness to other actors and

¹ The study, titled Not the Chicken, not the Egg, but the Nest!, was conducted by Marieke van Geldermalsen and Monika Jaeckel for **mine**, see www.nest.cc .



resources. This calls for de-institutionalisation and a strengthening of self help and citizen involvement as well as a shift in the role of governments and local authorities from being key decision makers and service providers to being facilitators of a process. A process through which inhabitants articulate their interests, mediate the differences and contribute their skills and resources. Concepts currently well under discussion like the network society or the creative city need to be matched by a creative participatory management process on the level of spatial planning. The matching orgware calls for the development of networking governance models and creative urban management systems.

A new role of local authorities in engaging in co-production and co-development with civil society requires an acknowledgement of everyday life as an expertise equitable to formal education and qualification. It requires finding new forms and channels of participation outside of formal decision making bodies and procedures. It requires creating equitable and sustainable partnerships and making adjustments of the professional culture around urban development. Ultimately it requires changing 'business as usual', which includes a re-balancing of influence, decision making, the flow of resources and power.

The resulting process of respectful collaboration involves a learning process on all levels, on the level of developing citizens skills like self initiative, collective responsibility and active participation, on the level of developing new governance models for local authorities like 'leading by stepping back' as well as on the level of developing the skills necessary to develop constructive and sustainable partnerships between multiple stakeholders across municipal sectors.

Women's participation and leadership is key to this process. Long term development is more likely to be holistic and sustainable when women are involved and central in the process. World wide women's involvement and leadership in local governance has proven to often be more inclusive and more effective, as it tends to take the perspectives and needs of all groups in the community into consideration, not only the views of the quick, the articulate, the most powerful and influential. Women often also take the lead in building bridges and alliances across social, cultural and ethnic divides in communities.

IV Conclusions

In international debates on the issues of urbanization, the bottlenecks of development are increasingly seen in the development of social resources and the human capital rather than in the development of the physical structures. Strategies of urban renewal, the prevention of violence and the creation of social peace focus increasingly on developing the social ecology of cities and neighborhoods, on creating social cohesion, civic engagement and active participation. People are not a problem but the richest assets municipalities have.

This limits the impact that developers and the physical element can have in urban planning. Neighborhoods need to come alive through a process of inhabitant involvement and community building. In this perspective inhabitants are seen not primarily as consumers or beneficiaries of policies but as the producers of urban development.

Demolishing and (re)constructing the physical as strategy to develop and upgrade neighborhoods needs to be complemented and balanced with strategies to maintain and



strengthen the social networks and investments of the inhabitants. Typically the billboards and advertisements of developers and real estate agents depict exactly those elements of attractive settlements that they as developers and providers of technically or physically perfect solutions cannot provide: people, atmosphere, community, identity. It is the local community that can contribute these substantive missing elements, if given the space and respect as acknowledged partners in urban development.

Recommendations

Participative and gender sensitive urban environments can be supported by the following policies:

- Mixed use of space, integration of the functions of work, commerce, living, care-giving and recreation
- Equal investment into the hardware software as well as the orgware of human settlements
- Supporting inhabitants to provide for their own needs and develop their own solutions
- Providing for self managed meeting spaces for inhabitants in housing compounds and residential areas
- Public infrastructure that welcomes children, elderly as well as other dependents into public life
- Allowing for the multiple and flexible use of public space by inhabitants
- Enabling conditions for the preservation and development of local economies, small shops, small scale businesses
- Creating experimental space in communities to allow for the development of bottom up creativity and innovation
- Creating enabling conditions for neighborhood initiatives like Mother Centers or Neighborhood Academies
- Re-channeling resources towards grassroots initiatives
- Acknowledging inhabitants and local communities as equitable partners in urban development
- Supporting women's participation and leadership in local governance and community development.

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