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Policies of care for a feminist urban culture. Two Strategic Plans in Barcelona and Montevideo

Chiara Belingardi

Abstract

The feminist urban theory challenges the traditional way to think and organize the city, around the idea of the dichotomy of Public/Private, where the public realm comprehends issues related to productive work, economy and finance, public spaces, political activities, and social relations; and the private one holds issues related to care/reproductive work, domestic spaces, family relationships, and giving priority to productive realm. Instead, some other concepts are key to re-think the urban. Among them, the concept of “care” which can be re-conceptualized no more as a family task, but, instead, as a public issue. The paper describes the application of this idea in two policies (Barcelona and Montevideo), and their spatial consequences.

KEYWORDS:

feminist city; care; public policies; public spaces

Politiche di cura per una cultura urbanistica femminista. Due piani strategici a Barcellona e Montevideo

La teoria urbana femminista sfida il modo tradizionale di pensare e organizzare la città, intorno all'idea della dicotomia Pubblico/Privato, dove il contesto pubblico comprende le questioni relative al lavoro produttivo, all'economia e alla finanza, agli spazi pubblici, alle attività politiche e alle relazioni sociali; e quello privato racchiude le questioni relative alla cura/lavoro riproduttivo, agli spazi domestici, alle relazioni familiari. Poiché l'urbanistica è legata all'ambito pubblico ed è informata dalla società patriarcale capitalista, dà priorità agli aspetti economici e finanziari e al lavoro produttivo. Sostenendo che "la persona è politica", il femminismo mira a superare la segregazione tra riproduzione della vita e attività di cura. Le studiose femministe hanno dato al concetto di "cura" un significato più ampio, facendolo passare da compito familiare a questione pubblica. L'articolo si propone di descrivere come sia possibile affrontare concretamente la trasformazione della cura in una questione pubblica, prendendo come esempio due progetti, a Barcellona e a Montevideo.

PAROLE CHIAVE:

città femminista; assistenza; politiche pubbliche; spazi pubblici

Policies of care for a feminist urban planning culture. Two Strategic Plans in Barcelona and Montevideo

Chiara Belingardi

Introduction

Urban planning, like other STEM disciplines, is traditionally considered a ‘technical’ field of research, and therefore neutral and apolitical (Sanchez de Madariaga, 2016). However, for some years now, feminist movements have been denouncing this pretended neutrality because it reduces their visibility as both city producers and city users (see, among others, Sandercock 1998; Matrix 1984, Belingardi et al. 2019). Scholars underlined that the “potential user” in planners’ and architects’ minds was an adult man, with a full-time job, moving with a car and with no care responsibilities (Muxì, 2018; *Collectiu Punt 6*, 2019). This is accompanied by a process of domestication of the care and reproductive activities (Federici, 2004; Mies, 2014), which became something private and familiar, with dedicated room in private house (Matrix, 1984), instead of being carried out in public spaces (Matrix, 1984; Amoroso, Garrido, 2023). The disappearance of care activities from public spaces was accompanied by women’s disappearance and growing isolation (Friedan, 1976).

Contemporary cities are built around the idea of the dichotomy of Public/Private, where the public realm comprehends issues related to productive work, economy and finance, public spaces, political activities, and social relations; and the private one holds issues related to care/reproductive work, domestic spaces, family relationships (Butler, 2023). This is reflected by the socialization of urban spaces, where the public spaces belong to men, and domestic spaces belong to women – or, also, men belong to public spaces, and women to the private ones (*ivi*). Since the beginning, feminist movements challenged this sharp division, especially in the so-called second wave, when the slogan was “personal is political”, meaning that streams of power and privilege are recognizable also in private behaviours, that can’t be solved only through personal relationships (Poli, Belingardi, 2023), and that the conditions of everyday life, including reproductive and care activities, should also be public and political.

The debate around women and the public realm produced some results in terms of public policies and commitments. During the ‘80 and ‘90 of the last Century, several debates were animated worldwide, especially after the Beijing Conference, when the concept of Gender Mainstreaming was coined, which was adopted in the EU in 1996. In 1994 “The European Charter for Women in the City: Moving Towards a Gender-conscious City”¹ was issued, which presented a 12-point declaration for creating gender-equal cities, taking into account both women’s needs and women’s proposals and the possibility of action in in planning. At that moment, the central point was the “conciliation” betwe-

en productive and reproductive activities, while the debate on the division of care work (Macchi, 2006) and on the quality of Everyday Life (Sanchez de Madariaga, 2004) was taking shape. The concept of Gender Mainstreaming once applied to urban planning, makes visible the challenges and needs of unpaid care work. Some criticisms arise as it appears that it could reinforce the gendered roles and the consequent division of labour. However, in the last chapter of her edited book about gender planning in Europe, Ines Sanchez de Madariaga (2016) addressed this question:

«Recognizing and making visible unpaid work in the city, giving value to it so that it receives equal priority with other main planning objectives, and effectively improving the physical environment in which it is performed, can be a powerful means for transforming gender relations in the longer term, above and beyond providing short-term improvement to women's lives. If substantially achieved, these three objectives of i) recognition, (ii) valorization and (iii) transformation of the urban and architectural conditions of unpaid work would substantially challenge some of the very foundations of current gender roles and divisions of labour. They would considerably transform cities as we know them today. They would, by themselves, provide a significant share of the conditions that built environments can contribute to an emancipatory agenda, making daily life better for everyone, men and women of every age alike. Furthermore, the symbolic power that would be embedded in an urban and architectural practice that recognizes and values the spaces of everyday life and care cannot be underestimated. Such architectural and planning practices would entail a sea change in current professional and institutional understandings of the city. More importantly, they would produce significantly different built environments where the value given to caring work and daily life would be apparent in architectural form.» (ivi, 329).

Undoubtedly, some more radical instances of changing the roots of the patriarchal society could be silenced, and some women could be excluded by a too-mild application of Gender Mainstreaming concepts. However, those traps could be overcome by assuming a caring position in the planning practice (Muxì, Orellana, 2022; Poli, Belingardi, 2023).

Women are not to be seen as a target of dedicated attention in a “neutral” project but as a subject of urban changes with different roles (Mattogno, 2013; Muxì, Orellana, 2022; Muxì, 2018). These two positions are strongly linked, as women's proposals often start from their urban experience, so they tend to solve feminine problems in the city or support reproductive tasks. However, due to their social position and thanks to the concept of intersectionality, women often make proposals that fit different social needs and tend to a more holistic approach (Muxì, Orellana, 2022). One of the main topics of these proposals is related to care and reproduction, to make urban spaces more comfortable for every urban population, as demonstrated by Orellana, Muxì (2022), Muxì (2018) and Bassanini (2008), among others. This happens especially when women reflect on their difference as planners/designers (Lonzi, 1982; Belingardi, 2019), and their urban

experience (Rodano, 2010).

The article aims to describe how care issues could be integrated into strategic plans. The first paragraph will deal with some key concepts and frameworks of feminist urban planning. Among these concepts emerges the question of making care a political issue, instead of a private activity. From this, it can derive urban public policies which have to be materialized in public/collective spaces or infrastructures of care (Care Collective, 2021). The second paragraph will summarise two different Plans (Montevideo and Barcelona) aiming at making care a public issue and fostering the co-responsibility of different actors (public bodies, community, single persons) in the social reproduction, beyond the gendered roles. The two policies are taken as an example but are not to be compared as the two cities are different in terms of size, economic situation, and condition of living. It has to be noted that Barcelona started the application of the gender perspective in urban policies and plans some years ago (Muxi, 2022), while Montevideo has a more recent history (Brunori, Musso, 2024). On the other hand, some points are recurrent, so they can be adapted to be included in similar policies in different contexts to transform care into a political – social – shared responsibility.

Key concepts for feminist urban planning: reproduction, care, and everyday life

The contemporary debate on feminist urban planning individuates some key principles and frameworks. Among them, with different positions and contributions, three concepts will be presented as a framework: reproduction, care and everyday life. With different perspectives, feminist researchers are contributing to solving the question of how to preserve life on earth, especially in the face of the damage and threats caused by capitalist and patriarchal society (Poli, Belingardi, 2023; Haraway, 2019). These three concepts contribute to forming a framework of complex and multifaceted meaning, which focuses on the care of relationships and life worlds, which appears particularly useful for giving indications on the design and management of the urban environment.

‘Reproduction’, intended as social, environmental, and human is a central object of feminist philosophies, economies, and ecologies (Federici, 2018; Velicu, Barca, 2020; Mies, Shiva, 2014; among others). In the book “A feminist Urban Theory of Our Time” (2021) Linda Peake et al. affirm that:

«Social reproduction is, of course, not just an analytical framing but also an organizing call for feminist scholars and our contention is that if we want an urban theory for our time, it needs to be feminist. Feminism is not simply a ‘discipline’, ‘theory’, or ‘ideology’, but a worldview, a lived praxis that provides a platform for engaged analysis. [...] We are reminded once again of the absolute necessity of social reproduction for human survival, of the fragility of the infrastructures and bodies that make social reproduction possible, and of the grossly unjust systems of power that secure the social reproduction of the few through the disposability, expulsion, and annihilation of many others.» (ivi, xv-xvi)

The reproduction of life means all the activities related to the surviving and the well-being of humans, that are carried out in the everyday. Therefore, there is a strong link between “Care” and “Reproduction” as they both refer to the activities, materials and social basis on which human and more than human life can survive (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Gómez et al., 2023; Care Collective, 2021). More than a theoretical concept, “Care” can be a framework and a tool that enables some questions, that can guide public actions:

«How do we value care? Who conducts care? Who should be responsible for care? How do we look at care in public and private institutions? How does care play out in communal activities and as a public good?» (Gomez et al. 2023, 156)

Answering those questions means observing how care activities are carried out on an everyday basis.

The Everyday Life Approach (Damyanovic, Zibell, 2013) recalls the concept of “Everyday Life” as originated in Lefebvre (1961), and reconceptualized as a strategic approach to evaluate the quality of life and built environment (Horelli et al, 2000), and to put people as a priority, instead of economic/financial issues (ivi, but also *Collectiu Punt 6*, 2019 and Nussbaum, 2013). Connected to this is the idea that people hold different urban experiences, which are to be fully recognized in the planning process, to equilibrate the discriminations incorporated in cities (Sandercock, 1998, among others). Therefore a participatory approach is needed, paying attention to giving voice to less listened-to groups (Young, 1999). Besides this, to overcome the possible discrimination deriving from policies and projects based on prejudices, two actions are to follow: improve the knowledge about women’s conditions and needs, by bridging the Gender Data Gap (Criado Perez, 2019), and maintain relationships and dialogues with feminist movements, associations and networks, recognizing in this way to women a role of the subject.

Care as a public policy

As exposed in the previous paragraph, the issue of care is one of the most important questions in feminist philosophies and debates, especially in contemporary times, when we face a crisis of care, due to Capitalism’s extractivism (Fraser, 2022; Cavallero, Gago, 2022). On the contrary, or as an answer, feminisms propose a shifting of the concept of Care from a feminine, innate, private characteristic to an ethical and political assumption (Tronto, 1993; Pulcini, 2020; Tola, Fragnito, 2021) able to shape different urban form (Giannini, 2023). This is possible when planners pose everyday life and care as key concepts and priorities when shaping urban form (*Collectiu Punt 6*, 2018). On a practical level, this means analysing the quality of life of different urban populations, especially in the aspects related to care, assuming that everyone needs and gives care, at least in some part of her/his/their life. Therefore, the focus is on dependent people

(children, aged people, and people with disabilities) and caregivers, both professionals and family members (who are mainly women).

To hold a holistic approach, that can put together different aspects of urban life, a strategic approach appears useful, which can put together different measures, on a physical, cultural and social level.

Here two cases will be presented: the Gender Justice Plan 2021-2025 of Barcelona and *Cuidados en el B*, a strategic policy in one of the Municipalities of Montevideo (2021-2025). These are two plans that arise in different social and cultural contexts and whose critical reading goes beyond the objectives of the article, which instead has a descriptive intent. The plans are therefore taken as examples of measures that can be adopted to socially share the responsibilities of care, both directly (taking charge of actions and practices) and indirectly (giving up some kinds of privilege in urban planning and organization of public spaces and transports).

Plan Para la Justicia de Genero (2021-2025)

The Gender Justice Plan 2021-2025 (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021) comes after the “Gender Mainstreaming in Barcelona Administration” (2015) and “Plan for gender justice in the administration of Barcelona” (2016 – 2020). It has two main objectives: the first is to foster women’s participation in politics, society and technology, regardless of their age, origin and social status; the second is to change public spaces, infrastructure, mobility, housing, business hours, social, educational and health services and the cultural model of the city, according to a principle of equality between women and men. It works around four axes: Institutional Changes, Economy for Life and Times Organization, City of Rights and Neighbourhoods Sustainable and Close.

The first Axe aimed to consolidate the institutional changes that started with the previous Gender Justice Plan (2016-2020), including, among others, gender assessments, gender budgeting, municipal workers’ organization, and citizen participation.

The second Axe aims to reach an economic model more equal and sustainable from a social and environmental point of view. It has five principal intervention spheres: feminist economic promotion, the democratization of care², time organization, action to tackle the feminization of poverty and precariat, technological resources and the digital divide.

In particular, when it talks about the democratization of care it considers the informality and gendered division of care and domestic work, underlining that even if men increase their participation in the realm, it continues to be mostly in charge of women, and it has a scarce social recognition. It recognizes the social and territorial networks as the main actors to be supported.

The plan takes into account the work and living conditions of care and domestic workers, and their often being migrant women (who can leave their family and children in their home country, creating an international care chain).

Finally, it recalls two principles of Ecofeminism: interdependence and ecodpendence,

claiming that «thinking Barcelona from an ecofeminist perspective means to put in the centre of every proposal and public policy the collective right to care and the resilience capacity» (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021: 59).

The third axe, City of rights, takes into account the social and cultural aspects of Gender Justice, with thirteen intervention spheres: participation, sexual and reproductive health rights, social action, Sport, education and science, life cycle, culture and collective memory, citizenship migration and interculturalism, housing, gender-based violence, global justice and international relationships, gender identity and sexual orientation, masculinities. In synthesis, the objective of this axe is to work in changing the patriarchal organization of society.

Finally, in the fourth axe, issues concerning neighbourhoods and urban forms are addressed. This gives a materiality to the commitments declared. The objective contained in this chapter is to create urban spaces focused on daily life, safe and comfortable, and ecologically sustainable. This is in continuity with other planning policies, like “Urban planning with a gender perspective. Planning for daily life” (2017). This axe contains five measures: Ecology and Sustainability, which deals with the gendered impact of climate change and the role of women and female children in tackling the crisis; Urban Space, which deals with gender equality in the access to urban spaces and opportunities, incorporating an intersectional perspective; Mobility; Safety and women’s comfort in the use of urban spaces at every time; and Proximity of services and equipment, integrating the gender perspective both in existing and new neighbourhoods and in industrial areas.

The Plan include a final part with an evaluation and monitoring system.

Cuidados en el B

The strategic plan *Cuidados en el B* (2021-2025) was established in Municipality B in Montevideo, Uruguay in 2021³. It starts from the assumption of interdependence and the idea that every person at least in some parts of his/her life was, is and/or will be dependent. Two other key concepts are the eco-dependence and the co-responsibility of care. The last means that the Municipality as well as the community have to take charge of the caring activities, because if not they will be the responsibility of families and the women in the family. Therefore, making care a public question means establishing public support for caring activities, like educational groups for children out of school time or on holidays and weekends; centres for people with disabilities and elders. All these services are mapped in a website, to improve the citizen’s information about the opportunities.

The community was involved through a participatory process in the definition of the plan, to share needs and resources and spread the attention on care. Since then people have been involved in some common activities, such as campaigns like “Mi balconera feminista” in which they put flags on balconies, or plant trees, especially autochthonous, and meetings and workshops, like the ones dedicated to racialized women and public meetings about care activities and problems (Municipio B, 2023).

The Plan integrated with by physical interventions in the urban spaces. In 2021 the experimentation of “Poligono de Cuidados” began in a pilot area to make it fully accessible, with ramps, improvement of the walkability of the streets, greening and trees’ plantations, benches and seats. Before these actions two projects took place in 2018: *Mujeres con Calle*, which aimed to equilibrate the celebration of women’s history and memories through the name of streets and public spaces, and *Las Pionieras*, a square designed with a feminist perspective (Intendencia de Montevideo, 2020). The square is minimal, with some movable seats and a mirrored panel, where everyone can reflect themselves and is managed together by six feminist collectives, which run several activities (Levy, 2023). The space is also open to the neighbourhood.

The plan is intended as incremental. It does not have a monitoring/evaluation system, which will be conducted through constant participation and dialogue with the community and feminist groups.

Making Care a Public Issue

As stated at the beginning of the paper, these two policies are not compared due to the high difference in the contexts in which they have been issued. Notwithstanding this, it is possible to find some recurrent points, that can be adapted also to other contexts: involvement of the community and feminist movements, targets, physical changes and the production of dedicated spaces.

The dialogue between the Public Administration and the feminist collective appears to be a key element for the reflections they can bring into the discussion. Gendered roles appear to be ‘natural’, with women ‘naturally’ taking care of the reproductive work, which results in an imbalance in the possibility of managing time freely and a load of responsibilities; therefore it is important to have the tools to question this situation. Although it is not possible to change family management (Macchi, 2006), it is possible to create a cultural humus to change some habits or at least to let the question emerge. A second reason is that, because the social change about gendered roles is still not in place, caring activities belong to women, who are the majority of people employed as caregivers, so they are the main actors to listen about the needs and proposals. Of course, as one of the aims of making care a public issue is to tackle the link women-care, it is important to involve people with caring responsibility or needs beyond their gender, in a specific participatory process.

A second question is about how “care” is intended. While looking at the history of projects and proposals to lighten the workload of women due to domestic work, it appears that they are concerned with other kinds of domestic work, with public-cooperative laundries, or houses with central kitchens (Hayden, 1981). In both plans, actions are related to dependent people, while domestic tasks are left to households. Sharing activities like cleaning or meal preparation can be practised in housing models like cohousing, which usually have some dedicated common space (Martins, Novak, Scarponi, Piazza, 2023; Andreola, Muzzonigro, 2023).

A third point is related to how the policies changed the urban environment, as both brought improvements on the streets with a widening of pedestrian paths, fostering of autonomy, especially for children and dependent people and putting everyday life at the centre while planning (Collectiu punt 6, 2019; Muxi, Belingardi, Pesce, 2023).

Finally, there is the creation of new public spaces. In her book about feminisms and spaces, Daphne Spain (2016) quotes Don Mitchell when he says: «The struggle for rights produces space; rights remain symbolic until they are given material form and public visibility. Some of the ways citizens assert these rights are by creating, claiming, or appropriating urban space» (ivi: 16). Therefore it can be assumed that an urban policy about care is less effective if there are no new public spaces devoted to it, nor some changes in the use of the existing ones. These can be intended as infrastructure of care (Care Collective, 2021) as they support everyday life.

ENDNOTES

1 http://habiter-autrement.org/22_sex/13_genre.htm

2 This measure comes after the “Policy for the Democratization of Care (2017-2020)” (2017) <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dones/sites/default/files/documentacio/mgdcures.pdf>

3 In the same year the National Government signed the National Plan of Care 2021-2025 (Ministerio de desarrollo social, 2021), to balance the care responsibility among the family and improv the assistance of dependent people (children, elders, people with disabilities, ...).

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