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Engendering Habitat III: Facing the Global Challenges in Cities

SPECIAL ISSUE

Sonia De Gregorio Hurtado and Inés Novella Abril coordinated this special issue with the editorial board

Table of contents/Sommario

Editorial/Editoriale

Monitoring the New Urban Agenda follow-up for gender equality/*Il monitoraggio dell'attuazione della Nuova Agenda Urbana per l'uguaglianza di genere*
Antonio ACIERNO 5

Introduction/Introduzione

Engendering Habitat III: Facing the Global Challenges in Cities/*Engendering Habitat III: Affrontare le Sfide Globali nelle Città*
Inés SÁNCHEZ DE MADARIAGA, Teresa BOCCIA 13

Papers/Interventi

Gender equality in achieving the vision of the New Urban Agenda/*L'uguaglianza di genere nel conseguimento della visione della nuova Agenda urbana*
Teresa BOCCIA 23

Implementing the New Urban Agenda: Research and Gender/*Implementare la Nuova Agenda Urbana: Ricerca e Genere*
Inés SÁNCHEZ DE MADARIAGA 27

Recognition in architecture and urban planning. Reshaping the profession for the New Urban Agenda/*Riconoscimento in architettura e urbanistica. Rimodellare la professione per l'Agenda New Urban New Urban Agenda*
Inés NOVELLA ABRIL 39

Evaluating quality of life perceived with a gender perspective: the case of Bilbao City/*Valutare la qualità della vita percepita secondo una prospettiva di genere: il caso di Bilbao city*
Maite AURREKOETXEA CASAUS 57

Gender and healthcare environments: a proposal of gender-sensitive methodology for improving the environmental quality in the existing heritage/*Genere e ambienti sanitari: una proposta di metodologia sensibile al genere per migliorare la qualità ambientale nel patrimonio esistente*
Rita BIANCHERI, Stefania LANDI 69

Architecture for maternity services: recover our spaces, create those who empower/*L'architettura della maternità: recuperare i nostri spazi, creare quelli che ci migliorano*
Angela MÜLLER, Marta PARRA 83

Housing designed thinking about women between academy and gender mainstreaming/*Abitazioni progettate pensando alle donne tra l'accademia e l'integrazione di genere*
Mónica SÁNCHEZ BERNAL 99

Local Planning of the Territory as a peace action from the gender dimension in Colombian peripheries/*La pianificazione locale come azione di pace dalla prospettiva di genere nelle periferie colombiane*
David BURBANO GONZALEZ 113

Participation of women in post-tsunami reconstruction processes in the Chilean Biobio Region coastal area/*La partecipazione delle donne ai processi di ricostruzione post-tsunami nella zona costiera cilena di Biobio*
Irina TUMINI, Iván CARTES SIADE, Carolina ARRIAGADA SICKINGER 129

Gender equality and the City: a methodological approach to mobility in space-time/ <i>La parità di genere e la città: un approccio metodologico per la mobilità nello spazio-tempo</i> <i>Margarida QUEIRÓS, Nuno MARQUES DA COSTA, Paulo MORGADO, Mario VÁLE, Júlia GUERREIRO, Fábio RODRIGUES, Nelson MILEU, Aníbal ALMEIDA</i>	143
Women, technology and the spatiality of fear: the challenge of participatory mapping and perceptions of safety in urban spaces/ <i>Le donne, la tecnologia e la spazialità della paura: la sfida della partecipazione mappatura e la percezione di sicurezza in spazi urbani</i> <i>Francesca SAVOLDI</i>	159
Urban Quality Audit from a gender perspective. A feminist methodology for the analysis, design and evaluation of everyday life spaces/ <i>Analisi di Qualità Urbana secondo una prospettiva di genere. Una metodologia femminista per l'analisi, la progettazione e la valutazione degli spazi di vita quotidiana</i> <i>Adriana CIOCOLETTO</i>	169
Some notes on how to introduce the gender perspective in urban policies. The case of the Valencian community (Spain)/ <i>Alcune note su come introdurre la prospettiva di genere nelle politiche urbane. Il caso della comunità Valenciana (Spagna)</i> <i>Carolina MATEO CECILIA, Alberto RUBIO GARRIDO, Begoña SERRANO LANZAROTE</i>	187
Integrating the gender perspective in the Urban Agenda for the European Union. State of the art and upcoming challenges/ <i>L'integrazione della prospettiva di genere nell'Agenda Urbana per l'Unione Europea. Stato dell'arte e prossime sfide</i> <i>Sonia DE GREGORIO HURTADO</i>	203

Sections/Rubriche

Books reviews/ Recensioni	219
Events, conferences, exhibitions/ Eventi, conferenze, mostre	241
Studies, plans, projects/ Studi, piani, progetti	249

Abstract

Women, technology and the spatiality of fear: the challenge of participatory mapping and perceptions of safety in urban spaces

Francesca Savoldi

Abstract

The fact that women feel insecure in public spaces is a growing concern for the planning discipline. Despite research carried out in previous decades, there is still a need to



better articulate knowledge around the multidimensional issue of fear experienced by women in public spaces.

This paper outlines a proposal of research based around the conception and testing of a collective monitoring model, which combines new digital technologies and public participation practices to address this concern. It entails the development of an experimental digital tool for mapping women's spaces of fear, which will be implemented in specific controlled environments through partnerships with local organisations concerned with women's safety, mobilising volunteer users.

The research aims to explore the capacities and limitations of this kind of model for improving women's security in urban landscapes, contributing to the understanding of "fear generators" that have an impact on the social exclusion of women in relation to the structures and characteristics of urban spaces. We will also discuss the efficacy and reliability of extending a controlled group collecting method, which monitors unsafe spaces, towards a crowd-sourcing method to promote gender-sensitive urban design.

KEY WORDS

Participatory Technologies, Fear, Mapping, Women's Safety, Urban Planning

Le donne, la tecnologia e la spazialità della paura: la sfida della mappatura partecipativa e la percezione di sicurezza negli spazi urbani

Il fatto che le donne si sentano insicure negli spazi pubblici è un tema crescente per la disciplina della pianificazione. Nonostante le ricerche effettuate nei decenni precedenti, vi è ancora la necessità di articolare meglio la conoscenza intorno al problema multidimensionale della paura percepita dalle donne negli spazi pubblici.

Questo articolo delinea una proposta di ricerca, basata soprattutto sulla concezione e la sperimentazione di un modello di monitoraggio collettivo, che combina le nuove tecnologie digitali e le pratiche di partecipazione pubblica per affrontare il problema. Esso comporta lo sviluppo di uno strumento digitale sperimentale per mappare gli spazi della paura delle donne, che sarà testato in ambienti specifici controllati attraverso partnership con organizzazioni locali che si occupano di sicurezza delle donne, mobilitando utenti volontari.

La ricerca si propone di esplorare le capacità e i limiti di questo tipo di modello per migliorare la sicurezza delle donne negli spazi urbani, contribuendo alla comprensione dei "generatori di paura" che hanno un impatto sull'esclusione sociale delle donne in relazione alle strutture e alle caratteristiche degli spazi urbani. Si discute anche l'efficacia e l'affidabilità di mettere a punto un più ampio metodo controllato di raccolta di gruppo, che monitora gli spazi non sicuri, verso un metodo di crowd-sourcing per promuovere un design urbano sensibile al genere.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Tecnologie partecipative, Paura, Mapping, Sicurezza delle donne, Pianificazione urbana

Women, technology and the spatiality of fear: the challenge of participatory mapping and perceptions of safety in urban spaces

Francesca Savoldi

1. A brief theoretical view about the spatiality of women's fear

1.1 Unequal use of urban space - multi-dimensionality of urban fear

The urban dimension of gender inequality is a growing concern for urban studies. Moving beyond the usual emphases on violence in domestic spaces, street violence is a universal phenomenon that has a wide impact on the equality of use in urban spaces.

Studies have shown that there is a difference between the use and appropriation of urban space between women and men; due to the gender-specific division of labour and the associated differences in the positions held in society, women and men still have different demands, opportunities, options for action (Harth, 2015). For instance women in general spend more time than men in neighbourhood squares and parks (Tessin, 2005; Smaniotto Costa et al., 2006). Moreover, women are much more likely than men to develop avoiding or self-exclusion strategies with regard to public places (Condor, Lieber and Mailochon, 2007); this inhibition in using the space has its roots in fear – a phenomenon that is often related to male violence (Pain, 1991), as a derived expression from patriarchy (Valentine, 1989).

This binary inequality is not only embedded in gendered fear and consequent spatial patterns in cities; the geography of fear is socially differentiated, reflecting other structural inequalities in society. A body of studies have shown how fear is not homogeneous for all women, rather, its experience is multiple and fragmented, with causes and intensity varying according to the social constructions of race, as well as with age, sexual orientation, class, income or disabilities (Brah, 1996; Han, 1986; Maynard, 1994; Pain, 2001; Valentine, 1989; Scraton and Watson, 1998); these components of the social identity and its intersections, affect fear of crime and spatial behaviour in the contemporary city.

An example of this was revealed in a study that investigated the use of public parks in Leicester city (Britain), where fear was a major deterrent limiting the use of parks for elderly, Asian and African-Caribbean women (Madge, 1997). Through that case, the author illustrates how the social map of patriarchy is also cross-cut by the social map of racism/white supremacy reducing the spatial movement of the black community in public space.

Nonetheless, categories describing social identity are not the only predictors of the socio-gendered construction of fear and consequent appropriations of space. Another

factor differentiating the experience of fear is related to lifestyle, which as shown by leisure studies, is strongly variable among women; for instance, going out at night is strongly variable in social terms, and this conveys to different experience of fear (Koskella, 1999).

In summary, the urban dimension of gender inequality reflected by fear in public spaces is a multidimensional phenomenon, comprising psychological, sociological, cultural and politico-economic spheres (Abu-Orf, 2013; Epstein, 1998; Sandercock, 2002). Instead of being mere users, women need to engage in living the space of the city, using and appropriating it in a safe and autonomous way.

1.2 The spatial component of fear

Considering the body of research concerned with women's fear in public space, it becomes clear that this phenomenon cannot be conceived in a monolithic way, but results from the intersection of several factors such as the various margins of social identity or the different experiences of victimisation. However, fear in public spaces does contain a certain component of spatial determinism. As highlighted by Roman Rivas (2009), it must not be forgotten that space is not merely a scenario of urban life, but also plays an important role in the fostering – or erosion – of equality and confidence in public spaces.

Certain spaces can work as “fear generators” due to their urban and architectural aspects; inadequate urban design, lack of maintenance and insufficient infrastructures can contribute to generate “fearscapes”. For instance, the places characterised by insufficient street lighting or blocked prospect problems (Kaskela and Pain, 2000; Thomas and Bromley, 2000), as well as those with limited access or abandonment (Zanotta Machado, 2009), contribute to enhancing a sense of fear in those places. As discovered by Valentine (1989), large open spaces that are frequently deserted, closed spaces with limited exits out of the visual range of others: subways, alleyways, multi-storey carparks and empty railway carriages are common places of fear for women. So, limited accessibility, visibility, density, security, are factors that determine the occurrence of crime (Knox and Pinch, 2006) and that increase the perception of fear.

Nevertheless, this perception depends not only on the composition of the physical environment, but also, self-evidently, on how the space is used, and who controls and appropriates it – a situation that can vary according to the time of day. Therefore, no single characteristic of the physical environment influences the perception of fear in a place, but also the connotations with which it is recognised in the shaping of mental maps in everyday geography. There is a social construction of space demarcating it as a ‘safe’ or ‘dangerous’ place (especially related to male violence) and that can be influenced by information flows (Pain, 1997) and personal experience of violence in public or private spaces (Pain, 2001), as well as personal perception of risk (Pawson and Banks, 1993).

Women's feelings of insecurity is a growing concern in the planning discipline; despite

research carried out in previous decades on women's fear in public spaces, there is still a need to better articulate knowledge around the different dimensions of fear, spatiality and gender. A solid base of evidence about places of fear and spatial behaviours needs to be created in order to find solutions toward a more inclusive city, conceiving framing and implementing positive actions into the planning process.

Despite the difficulties related to a hypothetical taxonomy of fear due to the complexity of the phenomenon, we believe that women's perceptions of fear can be mapped and monitored in a collective way. Our method takes advantages of ICT and public participation strategies.

2. A proposal for understanding and monitoring places of fear through a collaborative platform

2.1. Introduction to the research proposal, objective and hypotheses

In this research we propose to look at how ICT and public participation can work together to improve the understanding of spatiality of women's fear, as well as to approach new ideas for reducing vulnerability in public spaces. This challenges classic models that often lead to privatization and invasive surveillance tools.

Mobile technology, which increasingly influences how people navigate cities, holds great potential in terms of understanding the dysfunctionalities of a city. It also marks a shift in the planning paradigm, due to the increase in cooperative practices in urban management. The purpose of this research is to evaluate whether a model based on the combination of collaborative mapping and public participation practices can identify the characteristics of public spaces where fear is generated in a reliable manner – and, consequently, whether it can be useful for mobilising community-wide support for improved urban design and management of urban space from a gender-sensitive perspective.

With this aim we propose to develop an experimental digital tool for mapping women's spaces of fear, which will be implemented in specific controlled environments, partnering with local organisations concerned with women's safety, which will mobilise volunteer users.

The specific objectives of this research are:

1. To contribute to the understanding of “fear generators”, which have an impact on the social exclusion of women in the city, related to the structure and characteristics of urban space.
2. To discuss how to pass from a controlled group-sourcing to a crowd-sourcing model, and how this can be considered effective in monitoring unsafe places and promoting gender-sensitive urban design.

Our hypotheses are:

1. A digital mapping tool implemented in controlled environments can be a reliable way of collecting useful data for understanding women's fear in public spaces, when supported by public participation strategies.

2. This experiment can act as a pilot for conceiving an enabling crowd-sourcing model for empowering women and monitoring places of fear, complementary but alternative to a surveillance-based security model.

The research method is based mainly on qualitative analysis, with data collection obtained by group-sourced maps, accompanied by in-depth interviews/questionnaires relating to concerned sites and the use of the digital tool itself. Participatory science strategies will be implemented in selected and controlled case studies.

Articulating the different dimensions of gender, security in public spaces and technology, we expect to:

- Obtain qualitative data about the socio-spatial perception of public spaces associated to fear, which operate as factors of engendered social exclusion.
- Explore the capacities and limitations of collaborative technological models for improving the security of women in urban landscapes.
- Address methodological approaches and stimulate a broader discussion about the reliability and effectiveness of this technological participatory model.

2.2. Digitally mapping spaces of fear

In inquiring into urban space, the ubiquity of smart phones is providing an easy and affordable way to obtain sets of geo-data, which are fundamental for observing spatial behaviours, as well as perception of space. Functionalities offered by mobile digital tools, such as mapping or tagging are very useful for investigating phenomena such as women's perception of fear in the city.

The digital mapping tool we are proposing will allow a better understanding of fear generators in urban space, making available functionalities aimed at identifying points, areas and itineraries that will allow geospatial analysis of paths of inhibitions in women's use of urban space and spatial patterns of risk avoidance.

Whereas tagging functionalities will allow the identification of those physical characteristics of places marked as "point or areas of fear" related to the urban and architectural aspects such as limited access, abandonment, insufficiently maintained infrastructures or other issues related to the inadequate urban design; tagging will be used also to measure a range of emotions that explain fear.

Furthermore, considering the multidimensionality of the phenomenon of fear and the heterogeneity of women's experience in urban space according especially to their social identity and previous victimisation, the tool will be designed in a way to be single-user oriented, having an (anonymous) profile where social identity-related information is indicated.

The combination of datasets gathered through the mapping tool will support us in

observing how certain characteristics of the public space impact on women's perception of fear, considering in its complexity and diversity, and how reduced spatial behaviours are consequently generated. These findings are useful in terms of inclusive urban design and safety measures planning from a gender-sensitive perspective.

2.3. Implementation through participatory strategies and Citizens as Sensors model

The implementation of the on-field research will count on a perspective based in Citizens Sciences and participatory research strategies, which actively engage with the grassroots community, allowing us to explore local knowledge and perceptions as well as giving a margin of flexibility in the scientific approach.

In the selected case studies, we will partner with specific stakeholders, in particular with local organisations concerned with women's safety in order to identify volunteers who will collaborate both in gathering data from their devices, and participating in in-depth interviews and focus-group sessions. This will predicate on designing sessions and a training course for the field data collector.

Applying a data-gathering model based on Citizens as Sensors, which considers in this case environment-controlled crowdsourcing of information about the urban environment, it is possible to gather measurements by recording individual perceptions and collective behaviour patterns. As well as enhancing transversal collaboration between academia, stakeholders and citizens, this model is also convenient in financial terms. However, the subjectivity of accuracy in the data gathered by volunteers, who are working as "monitoring sensors" of the urban environment, is a factor to keep in consideration. In order to validate this data in the most reliable way, we will implement focus group sessions and in-depth interviews, triangulating map data with personal narratives of fear perception.

2.4 Creating a pilot for a bigger model

After carrying out an evaluation of the model we have applied, observing in particular both reliability and effectiveness of the digital mapping tool for the purpose, and the conflict and complementarities between data coming from different sources, we will discuss how this experience can be considered a pilot for a greater model.

In this second part of the research, we will study the possibilities of passing from a controlled environment of users to an expanded crowd-sourcing model, with the aim of conceiving a supporting tool for a collective monitoring of places of fear in public areas, contributing to an engendered urban planning. In this framework, a broader discussion needs to be promoted in order to consider the advantages and limitations of a collective monitoring tool for women's safety that counters those safety measures based on the

surveillance-based model and privatization of public spaces. There is a need to think about safety from different angles, given that urban fear is a concept that comprises political dimensions: it can be instrumentalised for instance to justify exclusive urban practices such as fortification, conversion of public spaces into hybrid private/public or other erosive practices of spatial injustice.

Therefore, alternative and complementary models able to provide urban spaces free of violence are needed, combining new chances offered by ICT and participatory practice that goes further than considering citizens only as sensors, promoting active women's engagement and citizenship.

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