

Feminine theory of urban design (Ghent, Sept 2010)

Eliana Perotti

Call for papers

10th International Conference on Urban History organized by the European Association of Urban History (EAUH), 1st-4th September 2010, Ghent

Deadline 31.12.2009

Specialist session S23.

Feminine theory of urban design, 18th-21st centuries: texts and proposals for the city

The metaphorical topos in which a female form, or even body, is ascribed to the image of the city - as in the Whore of Babylon or Jerusalem the Bride - has a long history. The topos is a response to an aspect of the city that exclusively involves the process of appropriating space. By contrast, it is more difficult to link the topos clearly with the production of space, which will be the central concern in this session. Examples illustrating a feminine city that is defined conceptually and productively are extremely rare - as in Christine de Pizan's *Le livre de la cité des dames* (1405), in which the founding of the city and the city itself are used as allegorical representations of a female history. This approach was hardly ever imitated in the centuries that followed. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist utopia *Herland*, published in 1915, is the only example we know of in which a city with female connotations is designed for a community of women.

With the development of women's studies during the 1970s, female planners and architects such as Ulla Terlinden and Myra Wahrhaftig initiated a critical feminist debate on city planning and regional development planning, focusing on the usage of space. Two main aspects were criticized: the limited extent to which women are able to appropriate space in the urban context, and the unequal distribution of public space. In Victorian England, Octavia Hill had already been concerned with fundamental issues of the availability of urban space, which she regarded as a social resource and demanded as such in her pamphlets. Concrete physical space, which is the focus of attention from the urban-planning point of view, was regarded and interpreted by

Octavia Hill as at the same time representing social, abstract space. A theoretical consolidation of discourse concerning space in the field of gender studies was achieved in investigations by the art historian Irene Nierhaus (1999), which included architecture, and analyses conducted by the sociologist Susanne Frank (2003) of the preconditions for and effects of gender arrangements in the production of the city. Their approaches, which open up important insights concerning the ways in which the city is produced, provide evidence once again of the absence of women, both in reality and in historical writing, from the processes involved in the conception, planning, designing and implementation of urban reality.

The first contribution to exploring the historical presence of women in the field of active urban planning - i.e., in the production of space - was provided by the American historian of architecture and urban planning, Dolores Hayden (1981). Hayden identified female pioneers in the field of design and planning and documented their work. By contrast, more recent women theorists such as Alison Smithson, Denise Scott Brown and Elizabeth Pater-Zyberk obtained access to the public sphere through the established channels of the architectural and urban planning system. Efforts to identify women's share in conceiving and implementing urban-planning projects are still in their infancy, and one concern of this session will be to investigate the contribution made by women to the conceptual development of urban planning. Although historical social conditions excluded women from the operational aspects of city production - with a few scattered exceptions such as legislative measures introduced by Maria Theresa, Empress of Austria - women were still able to express themselves in the theoretical field, and did so. One major example is Countess Adelheid von Dohna-Ponińska, who in 1874, using the militant-sounding male pseudonym Arminius, drafted a full-scale theory of urban planning, which she presented in the canonical form of a treatise. Although there were certainly other women who would have been capable of expressing opinions on urban-planning issues, they generally used genres quite different from the traditional medium of a theoretical treatise. This was because women were excluded from educational structures, courses of professional study and institutional posts - a fact that influenced the way in which the positions and theories they developed in urban planning were defined from the point of view of social usage, although it also made it possible for them to establish new paradigms. Female theory is thus often articulated negatively, as a critique of the existing city - for example, by the French socialist writer Flora Tristan in the mid-19th century in her accounts of travels in England, or by the English author Frances Trollope, who visited metropolises in Europe and America and commented on them with

expertise. A century later, the American civil-rights campaigner and non-fiction writer Jane Jacobs similarly criticized the declining urban quality of the big cities.

Architectural assignments that have highly feminine associations - mainly involving the design of residential buildings and homes - are exceptions to the rule that female influence is excluded from the production of urban reality. Creative and innovative impulses can be identified here not only in the way in which the rooms and the infrastructure of the interior are arranged, but also significantly affect the urban standard used. An example of this is Melusine Fay Pierce's idea, influenced by Charles Fourier and Robert Owen, of 'cooperative housekeeping' - i.e., kitchenless apartments with communal kitchens and communal washrooms - which was an important contribution to the development of new concepts in urban planning. It may also be suspected, and hopefully it can soon be confirmed, that these new and sometimes subversive ideas for ways of arranging residential space and organizing kitchens imply an experimental design for testing new visions in urban planning.

The specialist session proposed here is designed - on the basis of women's texts of various genres and provenances, dating from the 18th century to the present day - to document the contribution made by women to urban-planning discourse, i.e. their share in the production of urban space. The aim of this investigation is to trace a possible 'other' theory of urban planning that explicitly draws on social commitment and reforming concerns as its sources, and which focuses on society.

Suggested major topics:

- Theories of space. Production and use of space: public and private space; concrete and abstract space, etc.
- Theory formation: text genres as strategies, critique of the city, new paradigms, biographies and spheres of influence, etc.
- Concepts of residence and urban planning: new models, apartment and kitchen as a micromodel of the city, detached houses and suburban districts in green areas as tools for segregation, etc.
- Monograph presentations of female theorists

Contributions from all disciplines especially from the historical disciplines, sociology, anthropology and the political sciences are welcome.

Session organizers

Dr. Katia Frey & Dr. Eliana Perotti, ETH Zurich, Switzerland

Paper proposals can be submitted on the website:
www.eauh2010.ugent.be/paperproposals

Reference:

CFP: Feminine theory of urban design (Ghent, Sept 2010). In: ArtHist.net, Dec 4, 2009 (accessed Dec 18, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/32158>>.