

## DESIGNING FOR GENDER EQUALITY: SPATIAL THRESHOLDS AS EMPOWERMENT DEVICES (1143)

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**Abstract.** Designing for inclusion, justice, and care means questioning how different bodies and voices are made visible in space and how architecture can translate their needs, aspirations, and identities. Historically, the heard and visible voices were those correlated with the mainstream, usually Caucasian, abled-bodied males, who addressed design through the lens of a universal man.

Designing through a feminist critique means questioning whose voice is represented and how this attitude can inform a different kind of engagement with people and the environment.

The idea of collaboration and co-design that permeates this approach to architecture allows for blurring the lines between public and private, individual and collective, considering the thresholds between these dimensions as places where empowerment, justice and dignity arise. In this sense, the contribution proposes a reflection on the design of collective housing conceived as catalysers of inclusive and democratic practices, able to foster gender equality through design.

**Keywords:** Feminist Critique, Spatial Thresholds, Empowerment through Design, Collective Housing.

### 1. Introduction

"We define the space in which we appear, and that act of appearance then defines our roles in society." (Betsky, 1995, p. XVII)

Designing for inclusion, justice, and care means questioning how different bodies and voices are made visible in space and how architecture can be aware, encapsulate and translate their needs, aspirations, and identities. However, the built environment is a spatial palimpsest charged with cultural, political and environmental tenets, where the power relations that have shaped our cities are unveiled. Space becomes a territory of conflicts, expulsions and encounters (Sassen, 2014) where collective and individual temporalities intersect and overlap synchronically. However, historically, the heard and visible voices were those correlated with the mainstream, the "space-makers", usually

Caucasian, abled-bodied males, who addressed design through the lens of a universal man, flattening the everyday experience and use of space with the idea of 'one size fits all'.

The discussion is centred around the meaning of designing for Gender Equality, which are the values, instances and themes that should be considered and how architecture could be part of this discourse. In this sense, "Gender Equality is explored through a multifaceted perspective, encompassing the notions of care – for people and the environment – of the right to appropriate and inhabit space – where people can participate as equals in its conception and construction, and of multiple experiences in space through time – where bodies through their movement, can generate spatial configurations" (Scaiola, in-press). This intrinsic complexity shows how achieving gender equality depends on both a cultural shift and physical and spatial modification. The New European Bauhaus Framework and the SDGs offer a theoretical impulse to the architectural and spatial discourse, tracing a trajectory towards more inclusive, just and socially responsible built environments (European Commission, 2021). However, a joint effort by scholars, practitioners and communities should be made to translate these goals into the materiality of space, not to consider them as mere slogans or declarations of intent.

In light of this, the contribution, positioned within a feminist and gendered critique of architecture, tries to lay the ground for a reflection on how to translate the values of a gender-equal city into spaces and architecture. Designing through a feminist critique means questioning whose voice is represented, how bodies are "physically, socially, sexually, and discursively produced" (Grosz, 1995, p. 104), and how this attitude can inform a different kind of engagement with people and the environment, assuming open-ended, in-becoming, spatial futures encompassed in feminist thinking (Schalk M, Kristiansson T, Mazé Ramia 2017). Looking at the city and modifying its structure through and from a feminist critique would not mean designing an only-woman city, but rather a city for everyone, a caring city, where the spatial character would reflect the social and cultural one. Indeed, there is a need to reframe the question of designing for gender equality and of feminist methodologies shifting from a "women-only issue" to an "everyone issue." Specifically, building on the notion of gender as a relational category (Scott, 1986) allows us to recompose the dualism between the androcentric city and the women-centred one, not considering the two of them as separate spheres but recognising how the notion of masculinity and femininity were constructed in relation to each other.

The idea of collaboration and co-design at different scales and stages that permeates this approach to architecture allows for blurring the lines between public and private, individual and collective, considering the thresholds between these dimensions as

places where empowerment, justice and dignity arise. In this sense, the contribution proposes a reflection on the design of collective housing conceived as catalysers of inclusive and democratic practices, able to foster gender equality through design.

Through discussing two design experiences, the paper seeks to become a terrain of discussion to further reflect on the spatial relation that gender has on our built environment. The two projects discussed are cooperative housing, displaying an explicitly feminist and gendered position towards spatial design. One is located in Vienna, Frauen-Werk-Stadt I, designed specifically for women, and the other is in Madrid, breaking down traditional gender roles. The main focus is on the transition spaces between the domestic, collective and public domains. By working on the concatenation of spaces, on the spatial sequences, between inside and outside, the paper wants to tackle how gender can shape the morphology of our spaces, re-weaving the relationship between gender, body, and architecture.

## **2. Make It Collective! Feminist Practices For Inhabiting Intermediate Space**

Bridging the intersection between spatial design and feminism allows us to recast the discipline of architecture, offering a renewed interpretation of urban phenomena, reframing our attention towards the "microphysics of everyday life" (Bassanini, 2008) and understanding how the form of space and its use are strongly intertwined. This shift in perspective offers a more comprehensive vision for the rights of bodies, voices and identities (hooks, 2000) and becomes a territory of experimentation and openings towards "altering practices" (Petrescu, 2007). As open-ended, dynamic processes of thinking and transforming space, they allow for a renewed synthesis of method, process and situated practices, where the shift from being-in-space to becoming-in-space introduces a transformative dynamism, correlating the "actual" with the "possible". (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

This conceptualisation of practising otherwise, counter designing the traditional male-centred city (Schalk, Kristiansson & Maze, 2017; Petrescu, 2007; Brown, 2016; Grosz, 1995) draws on a feminist urban critique which considers space as not neutral nor equal, but permanently entangled and defined by power struggle (Lefebvre, 1969), hierarchies, and discrimination. Feminist and gendered critique of space has revolved around the question "What Would a Non-Sexist City Be Like?" (Hayden, 1980), striving to spatialise the issues of gender and discrimination by design in the materiality of space. However, many questions remain underexplored on how to translate the values for a gender-equal space into the built environment and what role architects, planners and scholars can have in fostering this transformation. This androcentric city makes itself explicit on several levels: the symbolic one (street names, male standards...), the visual (sexist advertisement...), and the physical (use of space, safety, accessibility,

comfort...), reiterating gender roles in space (Stratigakos, 2008). (Fig. 1)



Figure 1. Contenedor de Feminismos, A. Caramés, C.Nogueira, U. Permui, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2022.

Source: Photo by the Author.

Current conceptualisations of feminist spatial interventions deal with practices of reappropriation of space as a political as well as a design act. These, sometimes performative, temporary activities follow the conceptual path traced by De Certeau's "tactics", where the event triggers a tactical appropriation of spaces. Through a conscious presence of bodies in space, oriented towards the construction of a project, it is possible to enable a spatial transformation. By moulding spatiality and temporality with corporality, the event becomes an interdisciplinary device questioning and transforming the social conditions of a place. However, for a transformation to be truly effective should manifest its influence on how space is designed to foster a permanent and lasting modification. If, as Darke says, "Our cities are patriarchies written in stone, brick, glass and concrete." (Darke, 1996, p. 88), then it becomes crucial to understand how the theme of gender affects the material construction of spaces to foster a spatial

culture, in a continuous tension between permanence and mutation where multiple identities coexist and interact within the urban milieu.

The contribution proposes a reflection on how gender equality can be spatialised, discussing the theme of living space rethought as a collaborative space for sharing daily life, focusing primarily on women as users and makers of space. Starting from the assumption that gender imbalance in the performance of domestic work is one of the leading causes of gender inequality and that precisely the isolation of households in their respective homes can be seen as a condition that fosters this kind of subjugation, the paper will try to recount shared and common spaces as a place capable of hosting collective forms of reproduction, as the centre of collective life, the first places for citizenship; a life traversed by different people and forms of cooperation, capable of granting intimate space (a room all to oneself) but without isolating. Rethinking these forms of cooperation and inhabiting from and through a feminist and gendered perspective brings to the foreground the issues of equality in space, where architecture can become a form of emancipation and empowerment for the "vanished" (Singha, 2018).

### **3. Methodology**

Through a research-by-design approach (Roggema, 2017; Schoonderbeck, 2017; Fraser, 2013), the contribution explores the theme of the extension of living spaces in the same building and towards the neighbourhood, focusing on the spaces for commoning, where the tension between private and public and individuality and multiplicity can be recognised and recomposed. As part of doctoral research grounded within a feminist and gendered critique of architecture, the paper explores the spatialisation of gender equality through the presentation and discussion of two design experiences. The aim is to build a 'terrain of conversation' on design practices, methods, and approaches encompassing gender in modifying the built environment.

The two projects, Frauen-Werk-Stadt I in Wien by Franziska Ullmann (Masterplan+Project), Gisela Podreka, Elsa Prochazka and Liselotte Peretti and Entrepatis – Las Carolinas in Madrid by sAtt Arquitectura, both share the concept of collaborative living forms making explicit a feminist approach to architecture, recentring the attention towards the "practice of everyday life" (De Certeau, 1988) and the notion of care and equality. Drawing from the concept of "Space as Matrix" by Susana Torre, the contribution investigates the spatialisation of gender equality, opening the necessity of rethinking the idea of space itself and the idea and forms of inhabiting architecture. Going beyond the traditional categories of housing, public space, workspace, of individual and multiple, this notion weaves them together, breaking down the hierarchical organisation of space and allowing "fixed elements to be combined with

open spatial possibilities for transformation and growth" (Torre, 1981).

The contribution presents two case studies by drawing from the theoretical framework developed during the 1970s and 1990s and from design experiences of collective and collaborative houses developed for (and often by) women. The current conceptualisation of collective and collaborative house is enormously indebted to the Viennese Ein Küchenhaus Type to free women from domestic labour, but also the Scandinavian experience which saw in Alva Myrdal and Sven Markelius, two precursors.

The focus will be on the patterns of inhabiting these spaces from a gendered perspective, understanding how this shapes their form and typology. Looking at spaces through their interconnection allows us to rethink proximity and everyday experience in space. The aim is to disclose the relationship between gender and urban morphology and how it can contribute to shaping spaces and fostering a long-term transformation. The paper considers the concatenation of spaces, the spatial sequence, as fundamental to fostering and bringing forward a reflection on the spatialisation of gender equality. By linking the private, the common and the public, the aim is to rethink the intermediate scale holistically and through a multiscale approach. Feminist scholars have focused on how women inhabit the domestic environment or the public domain; however, they also state the necessity to go beyond the traditional division of private/public.

The intention is to investigate the spatialisation of gender within the selected case studies. Each project is dissected in spatial elements, presenting them like micronarratives. The aim is to understand how the notion of gender and how space is used can inform spatial configurations, characters and forms, understanding how gender impacted the design of those spaces and how their transition and interconnection or separation allow recognition and appropriation of spaces.

#### **4. A Tradition That Continues: Frauen-Werk-Stadt I In Vienna**

The project Frauen-Werk-Stadt I is located in the outskirts of Vienna (1993-1997) following a design competition organised by the Frauenbüro. In those years, the city was undergoing a deep process of renovation and cultural change that brought to the recognition that housing has much more to offer than a physical shelter, but rather a place that was defined and defined the owner's identity. Housing becomes "a way of orienting oneself in the world and of dealing with the world outside – the world beyond the private" (Ullmann, 2013, p. 300). As head of the Frauenbüro, Eva Kail inspired and promoted this change, fostering extensive research on gender mainstreaming and thematic design competitions on social housing, mainly focusing on women's perspective. The exhibition and seminar organised by Kail, "Who Owns Public Space? Women's Everyday Life in the City," triggered a reflection on women's needs, the use of

space through time and the need for affordable and inclusive housing.



Figure 2. Frauen Werk Stadt I. © Dieter Henkel under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

The innovative aspects of the project Frauen-Werk-Stadt I are related to formal and design aspects and the process of conceiving it. Accordingly, the project results from a design competition which specifically addressed women architects for the design of this pilot intervention. The intention was to shed light on the work of women architects, making them visible in the design panorama, as well as building a complex encompassing everyday needs and tasks, flexibility and openness of inhabiting and working.

The masterplan was conceived by Franziska Ullmann, establishing the general intentions for the development: "orientation and movement patterns; the relationship between public and private realms; and the different mobilities, needs and expectations of different groups in society" (Ullmann, 2013, p. 301). The complex is designed looking at the traditional Viennese Hofe, an enclosed courtyard structure that allows for various open spaces welcoming different uses. For the design of the buildings, the municipality called three more architects: Gisela Podrecca, Lotte Peretti and Elsa Prochazka, who addressed specific issues; for instance, Elsa Prochazka's segment explored the question of housing for every phase of life, breaking down traditional hierarchies and organisations. (Fig. 3)





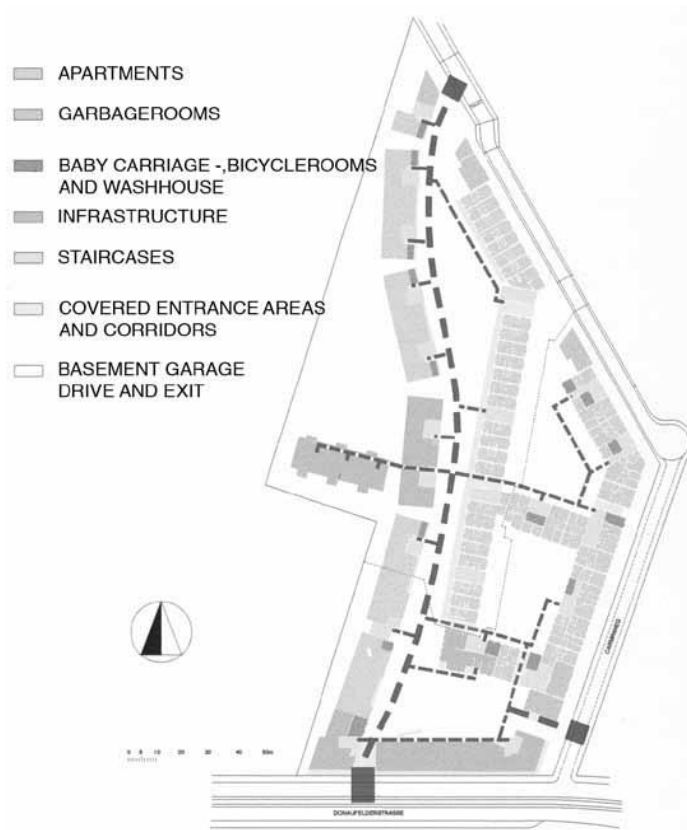
Figure 3. Franziska Ullmann, Design Competition Masterplan (Left). © Franiska Ullmann // Plan, Elaboration by the author based on Franziska Ullmann's drawing.

This collective housing complex welcomes, besides the 359 apartments, a series of common spaces, among which a kindergarten, a physician, a police station, commercial spaces, a pharmacy and shared facilities complementing the apartments and public spaces. They are structured as a series of rooms that mediate the relationship between private and public spaces; they display a typological variety: open spaces, open/covered, closed, semi-transparent, transparent exploring the questions of meeting, interacting, sharing and making explicit people's presence in space. (Fig. 4) (Fig. 5)





Figure 4. Common Spaces - © Dieter Henkel under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 except the bottom left one which is by the municipality of Vienna



POSSIBLE CONNECTIONS  
HIERARCHIES OF ACCESS

Figure 5. Franziska Ullmann, Possible Connections and Hierarchies of Access © Franziska Ullmann

This idea of looking and meeting is reinforced by the presence of a semi-public square parallel to Donaufelderstrasse and by open corridors, loggias, balconies and wide windows on the buildings projecting the inside towards the outside. The architects wanted to design a permeable complex that would become a threshold between privacy and publicity, between the house and the city. In this sense, the formal and spatial organisation of the intervention showcase a feminist approach to architecture with solid attention to the use of space by living bodies. Security, accessibility, flexibility, no hierarchy, openness and attention to everyday activities are criteria that have informed the design process and outcome. Specifically, they interact both with the material dimension of space but also on the symbolic and perceptual one, where, for instance, a greater sense of security or using the words by Ullmann to refer to as "see and be seen",

given by transparency and passages, but also on visual connections among the levels and the ground floor, allows to create a social space and a neighbourhood infrastructure. (Fig. 6)



Figure 6. The relationship between the architecture and the context © Elsa Prochazka

This openness is favoured by the presence of interconnected open and open/covered spaces that become meeting places where children can play and have their privacy while being seen by the inhabitants. These spaces are visible, especially on the ground floor, because of the distinctive elements that characterise them, such as steps, corridors, and fences. Moreover, they are on different levels, where in-between the apartments are lobbies, storages, halls, and wide passages that become places for interactions. The intention was to foster different degrees of collectivity, offering the opportunity of sharing spaces or having more private moments.

Frauen-Werk-Stadt I becomes a fundamental experience on how to rethink collective living from a feminist and gendered perspective, expanding the traditional notion of inhabiting a space, rethinking the everyday life and materialising it into architecture.

## 5. Micro-Stories Of Everyday Life: Entrepatrios In Madrid



Figure 7. sAtt, Entrepatrios Las Carolinas. © Andrés Valentín-Gamazo

Entrepatrios Las Carolinas is the first ecological collaborative housing under a right-of-use regime located in Madrid (2018) designed by sAtt Arquitectura and developed through a participatory approach, together with the Entrepatrios Cooperative through fifteen workshops. Although not specifically directed to women, as Frauen-Werk-Stadt I, the project encompasses a gender and feminist perspective to design, both in the process and the outcome. Expressly, gender was incorporated into the project to explore, articulate and reinforce the design solutions fostering a transformation of the traditional residential architecture to give greater importance to reproductive and productive activities and the diversity of household patterns and residential needs. Moreover, gender also informed non-spatial aspects such as the decision-making process and the financing and promotion of housing. Specifically, participatory design often facilitates significant participation of women in decision-making; from a management perspective, cooperatives help women to access decent housing, especially when they are heads of the household. (Fig. 8)

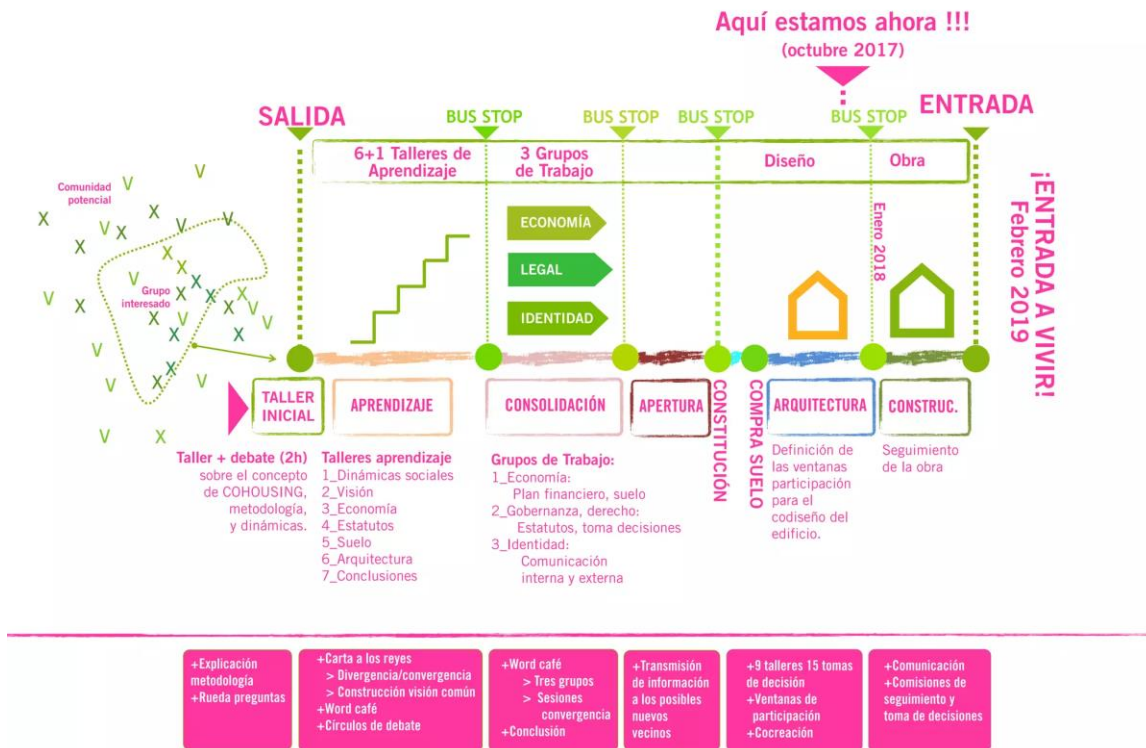


Figure 8. sAtt, Structure of the Design Process. © sAtt Triple Balance

In this project, gender considerations have influenced the three pillars of sustainability: social, environmental, and economic, where they are strongly intertwined to promote a democratic, inclusive, non-hierarchical, climate-sensitive and affordable intervention.

In Entrepatrios, they have tried to ensure that the building favours encounters: corralas, communal courtyards, attics, communal kitchens, shared washing machines; they want excuses to live together, to share, an excuse to see each other, to live together, to build, collectively, other ways of relating to each other. This housing comprises seventeen apartments designed flexibly to accommodate future changes and different uses. (Fig. 9)



## ACCESO



## VIVIENDAS



## ÁTICOS, TERRAZA



## PROGRAMA

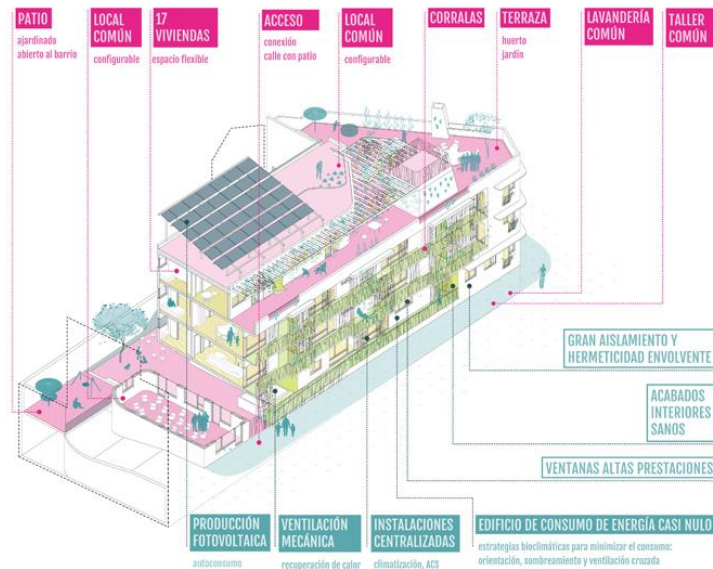
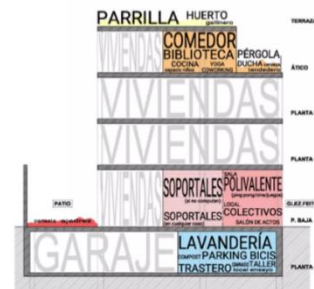


Figure 9. sAtt, Drawings of the intervention. © sAtt Triple Balance

The heart of the project lies in the shared spaces; generating and locating them, especially on the ground floor, aims to expand the living spaces in the same building and



towards the neighbourhood, binding together private and public dimensions. Workshops, communal laundry, a rooftop communal vegetable garden, a large communal room with a kitchen and several open spaces are among the shared facilities that contribute to building this complex residential architecture. These common spaces become a threshold where they can host activities from both the neighbourhood and the community living there. Moreover, gender considerations have also influenced the design of circulation spaces; On the one hand, access to the dwellings is through corridors (corralas) that favour interaction between neighbours. Their dimensions allow for some activity, becoming living areas and not just connecting devices. By extending the use of these elements located on the main façade, the building also improves the perception of security in its immediate urban surroundings, following the concept of the "eyes on the street". Also, the entrances have been rethought; for instance, the space next to the main entrance has an entrance both from the communal courtyard and from the road, fostering a greater permeability. (Fig. 10)

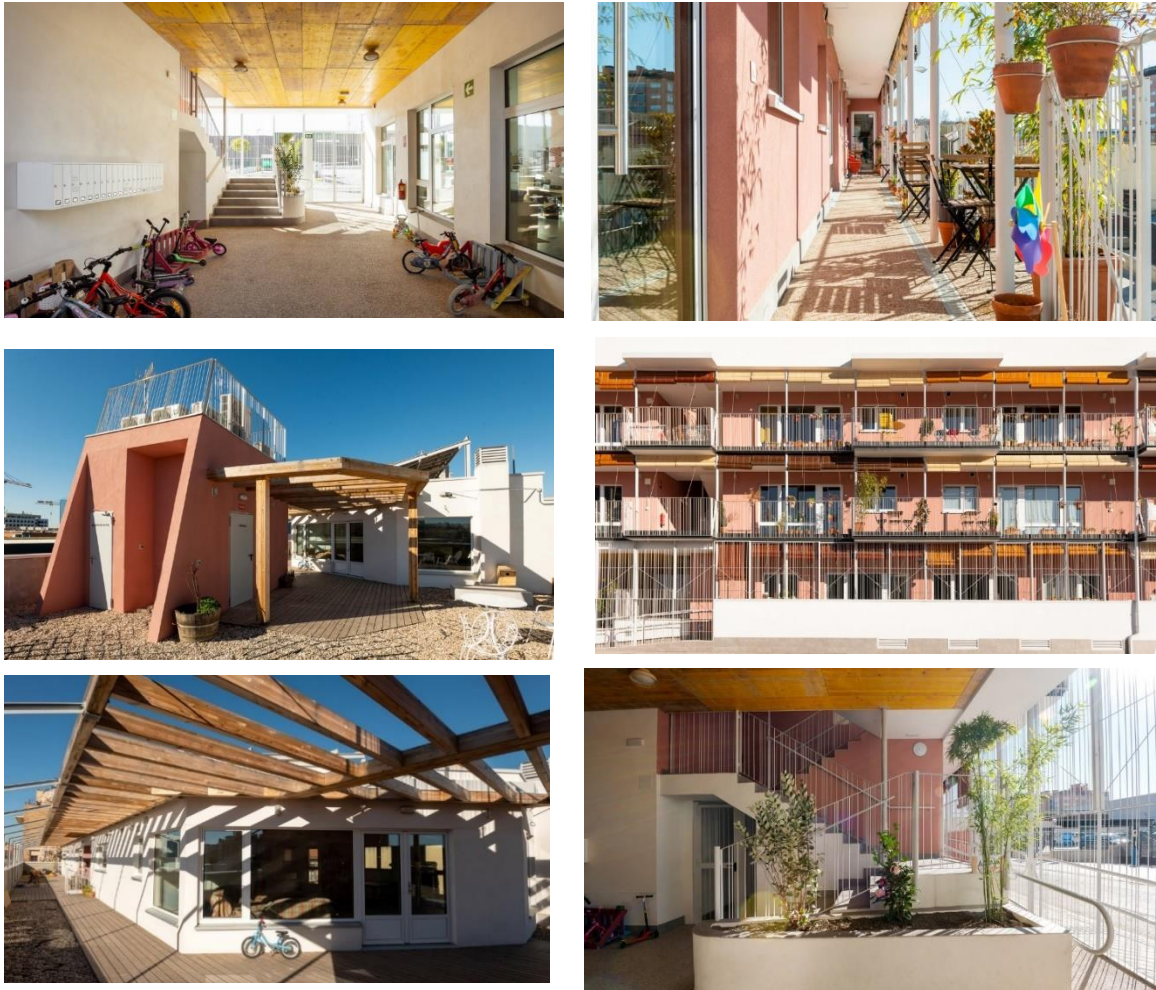


Figure 10. sAtt, Common Spaces. © Andrés Valentín-Gamazo

## 6. Building Equality Through Architecture

The two design experiences, Frauen-Werk-Stadt I and Entrepatisos make explicit how gender equality can be encompassed and translated into spaces and architecture. The projects explore the theme of the extension of living spaces in the same building and towards the neighbourhood, focusing on the spaces for commoning, where the tension between private and public and individuality and multiplicity can be recognised and recomposed. By linking the private, the common and the public, the aim is to rethink the intermediate scale holistically and through a multiscalar approach. Focusing on the intermediate scale allows observing, understanding and rethinking proximity which can be made explicit through everyday activities. Here, building on the notion of the fabric as a constructed object (Corboz, 1985), a co-evolutionary milieu where different identities, collective memories (Choay, 2004), and social infrastructure in its multiplicity of experiences emerge, together with the construction of space. "Therefore, collective and spatial identity merge and shape the site consciousness" (Semprebón et al., 2021, p. 67), which is built through time by situated (Haraway, 1988) and gendered bodies (Spain, 1992) that interact in a shared urban milieu.

The concept of commons becomes crucial in this discussion, where "conceiving space-as-commons – to think beyond the notions of public and private space, and then to understand common space not only as space that is governed by all and remains open to all, but that explicitly expresses, encourages and exemplifies new forms of social relations and of life in common." (Stavrides, 2016). By focusing on collective and collaborative living as a form of emancipation fostering gender equality, the discussion starts from the idea of deconstructing traditional housing, where the trajectory to be taken means that "the household should be extended to the world" (Hayden, 1981). Cooperative housing seeks to respond to these new forms of social organisation, and together with the networks of commonality and diverse kinships that are organised around them, can be creative ways of dealing with the reproduction of life, care and upbringing. (Fig. 11)

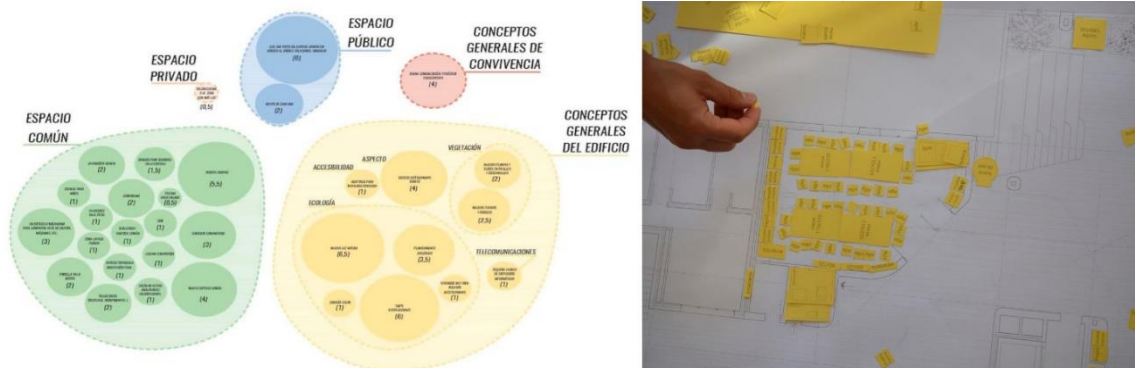


Figure 11. sAtt, Participatory Process. © sAtt Triple Balance

The discussion of these experiences sheds light on the complexity and multifaceted condition of this discourse, where the relationship between gender equality and the built environment involves the design process, the outcome, but also the management of the intervention. It deals synchronically with the materiality of space, with its cultural, social, and economic values and how it is used through time. 'Architecture as process/Architecture as object'. In this sense, these two conceptions of architectural design can be recomposed by and through a feminist critique, creating a relationship between the 'Software' or its intangible values and the 'Hardware', its material dimension.

Looking at the projects from a feminist and gendered perspective, it is possible to deconstruct a series of values and issues to trace a path towards the translation of gender equality in the built environment. These traits work at the crossroad of the material and immaterial dimensions, where these practices allow us to build a community day by day. This "Soft Infrastructure" (Mogollo, Fernandez, 2015) functions through invisible affective dimensions and relationships between elements (between people and place) or even through performative acts. Specifically, the attention to diversity and social and spatial complexity, participation in the design of its inhabitants, de-deconstruction and flexibilisation of spaces, attention to workspaces and processes, storage spaces, attention to intermediate spaces, adaptability and transformation over time.

Time thus becomes a fundamental design variable in this perspective as a way of responding to needs not yet expressed but which will become open questions for future architecture. Projects must be constructed as spaces capable of narrating the inhabitants' daily lives that can accommodate the "choreographies of life and choreographies of movement" (Ullmann, 2013) by integrating with the existing built fabric; in a continuous tension between permanence and modification. This flexibility and adaptability of spaces - understood as the possibility of accommodating multiple uses simultaneously - contribute to de-hierarchising architecture and space, moving away from the patriarchal organisation of housing and exploring ways of designing differently. Intermediate spaces are configured as thresholds, spaces between things, spaces where the first forms of citizenship, equality and democracy emerge. They are spaces conceptually located at the intersection of material and immaterial dimensions, where spontaneous and more formalised practices coexist. However, their transformative capacity is linked to their existence within a network, a concatenation of collective spaces capable of generating narrative sequences and shared dwelling use. Reflecting on the issue of how to translate the theme of gender equality in space entails reflecting on the patterns of relationships and of use of these spaces from a symbolic and physical point of view. By understanding how women and minorities use space over time, from walking to living, it is possible to rethink spaces and architectures as open to

modification and adaptable to their needs and expectations, weaving together sociality, spatiality and temporality. (Fig. 12)

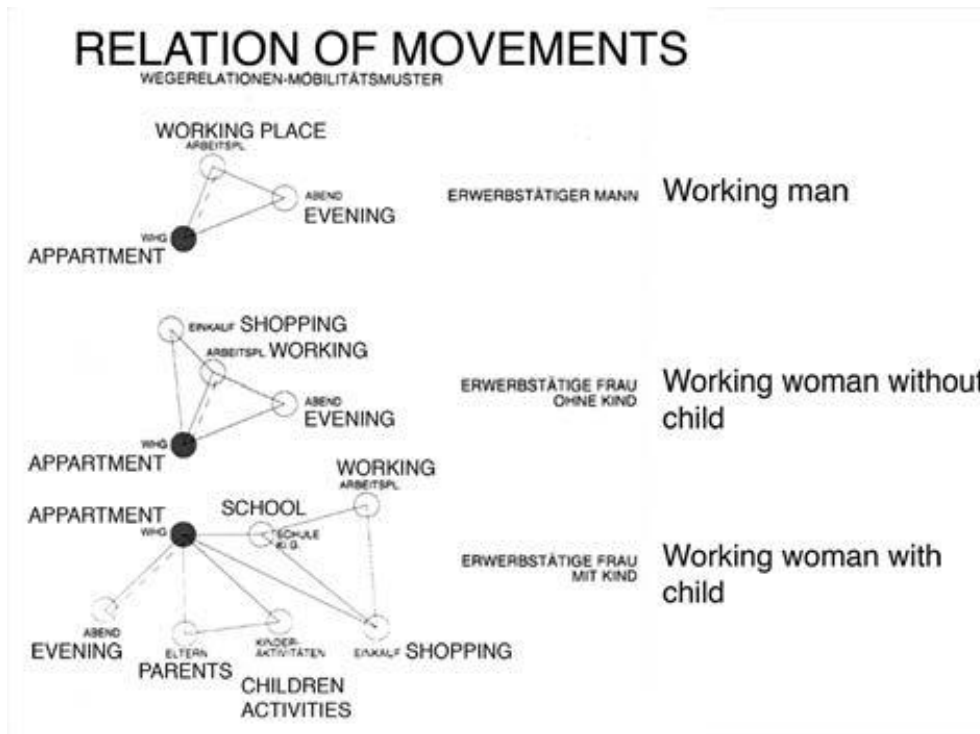


Figure 12. Franziska Ullmann, Relation of Movements. © Franiska Ullmann

In this sense, empowering more marginalised groups through architecture is essential in framing the transition towards self-reliant communities (Shuman, 2000). A shift in perspective, parallel to the mainstream one, that engages traditionally excluded populations through co-creative processes and builds local knowledge and a sense of caring to build a space in which communities, and specifically women, can participate as equals, introducing their knowledge, innovations and identities.

## 7. Conclusion

The contribution, by looking at two design experiences of cooperative housing through and from a feminist and gendered perspective, seeks to become a brick in the discussion about the spatialisation of gender equality. Collaborative and collective housing that expands beyond the single architecture and the traditional way of practicing could open new possibilities for neighbourhood design. In this framework, intermediate collective spaces become relevant as empowerment devices. Here the aim is not to give fixed answers or contribute to defining a 'feminist manual of intervention to foster gender equality'; but to set up a series of questions and issues to widen the discussion among

practitioners, scholars and communities.

The SDGs framework has contributed to defining some goals far from their intended objectives, where the current social, environmental and economic crisis substantially impacts how we will live together. However, it is not only a matter of rethinking our objectives, but our built environment; the heritage we have inherited is greatly indebted to patriarchal norms, where standardisation, mono-functionality, and segregation still define its character. In this sense, it is necessary to rethink the forms of inhabiting space in a more democratic, inclusive and gender-sensitive way to build a culture of preparedness towards the challenges of living in the post-2030 era.

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