

The Truth about remaining power dimensions in space!

By Nils Wattenberg

Abstract

Ever wondered how spaces would look if they weren't solely dominated by patriarchal structures? What potential are we losing by hindering the diversification of spatial designs? I want to make it clear why I think there's not enough consents about unjust power dynamics in the development of postmodern spatial concepts. They are becoming more 'genderized,' but not from a motivation that sees the greater good of an equal society. Mostly, because we still live in a man dominated world! I believe the current discourse about gender equality barely touches the surface of spatial power dynamics that continue to reproduce gender stereotypes – and no one's saying a word about it. So, let's dive into how spatial power dynamics are rooted in our history, manifested, and added to a standardization catalog. What a gender-equitable environment in public spaces could look like today, and why we still lack sufficient knowledge about fair planning will be discussed here.

The lack of knowledge is why my goal isn't just to summarize new participation forms. Instead, I want to understand the extend of gendered spaces that contributes to keeping us in an exclusive and homogeneous society that got a significant impact of which we turn away from in our daily lives. They've become so ingrained that we continue to exclude new approaches from our normality. Of course, each individual moves in their own cosmos. Yet, more open perspectives on one's own privileges and an understanding of their complexity can lead people to navigate more attentively through their surroundings. It might then become easier to detach from subjective perceptions and embrace other perspectives – the perspectives we need to advance the discourse and truly achieve a more gender-equitable spatial research.

Case study

First, I want to introduce you to a case study in Sweden, a country that stages itself as gender equal internationally. Umeå is a city in the northern part of the country that seems to make great efforts when talking about gender-equal planning. By looking at their efforts we might get closer to the answer to the question: What do we have to improve especially in our urban areas to make better achievements towards a gender equal space, if there is no Role model yet? And how are these efforts still often connected to spatial power relations that prevent equalities?

How to become

The study is introduced as the concept of “imagining the ideal city” by Linda Sandberg and Malin Rönnblom, two professors at Umeå's university. This reminded me of the idea of “Heterotopia” by Michel Foucault's, saying that there is distinction between imaginary spaces from everyday landscapes. Here introduces and classified by civic right activist Mary Mcleod (Mcleod, 1996, p. 16). Sandberg and Rönnblom acknowledge the imaginary from a similar point of view and say that there is no gender equal city either. But they take planning efforts in consideration and are convinced that Transport and Mobility, Hygiene and Health, Fear in the

City and Visibility are main topics when it comes to designing a more gender equal urban space (Sandberg and Rönnblom, 2016, p. 1752).



They have concluded for Umeå that there are efforts in the spatial planning and staging of the city in three different sections (Sandberg and Rönnblom, 2016, p. 1755-58):

They would be trying to integrate a focus on women's fear of violence in public spaces and planning practices. The main goal here is to achieve a space everyone feels in comfortable and safe and is accessible to a wide range of different genders and body types. Also, they try to present symbolic state-

ments of gender equality, by creating extra spaces for women and queer rights. An example for this is the women's museum that was founded in the city center to express the lack of female representation in human history. The third and last effort is that they integrated programs those enable public discussions and performances about strategic knowledge of different norms by combining spaces of gender equality and spaces of gender inequalities.

The problem

The achievements made in Umeå could be seen as innovative and a good way to get some progress in urban planning. They are doing educational efforts by trying to raise attention for the topic in public spaces in how different humans approach spaces depending on their gender relation when they move through space. However, Umeå to me is not representative for urban development in other European countries. That's because the political dimension in this case is comparably small. It's a municipal engagement that usually doesn't have a sustainable impact on policies because of their spatial boundaries (Sandberg and Rönnblom, 2016, S. 1752). The efforts in the commune of Umeå are progressive because of single individuals that have done intensive research that led to a new ambition for the city planners and the community in town.

Often you rather have a politicization of the topic gender equality out of marketing proposes, which consequence is a losing thread, because they won't lead towards sustainable changes and is only about branding. There is the argument that city marketing is more about myth-making by 'connecting elements of old myths to ambitions for the future' (van den Berg 2012, p. 165).

I see other still existing inequalities as responsible that are in some way connected to the surroundings, we are in, which leads us to the main topic: Spatial Power Dimensions. One example for those is a division in private and public spaces that were strongly gendered in the past and still contribute today. Consequently, they end up in systematic inequalities concerning the income of women and the

ownerships of public spaces. A product of a binary world that implemented that the public sphere is made for working man and the private belongs to the caring women (Pomeroy, 2004, p. 3). I argue that if women agencies would be more dominate in space planning and the property or ownerships were equally distributed only then we will be able to make decent steps towards gender equal spaces and leash the spatial power inequalities. Here I am referring to noble prize owner Amartya Sen. She has done lots of eye-opening research about women capacities from an economic perspective (Agarwal, Humphries & Robeyns, 2005). But if we are not able to get rid of the injustice concerning the power or rather capacity inequalities, we will never be living in a space that treats all human in the same way. So, we have to ask ourselves the same question as Mary Mcleod (1996): “Are there other formal and social options - options beyond transgression and nostalgia, deconstructionism and historicist postmodernism - that might embrace the desires and needs of those outside the avant-garde? (p. 22)”

We must accept spatial power relations.

I think to get to a point where the spatial power dimensions will no longer affect our living together, we must acknowledge some things first. Sandberg and Rönnblom summarize today's discourse of the current circumstances quiet well. They quote two geographers Liz Bondi and Joyce Davidson (Sandberg and Rönnblom, 2016, p. 1752) saying:

“Gender relations are thus constructed in and through space and place and, equally, space and place construct gender.”

This basically means that we all still approach spaces differently depending on our gender identity. This indicates that gender equality would be a product that needs to include an understanding of the impact of different power relations established by class, race, and sexuality because different constructions of space have an influence of these identity shaping relations that inevitable are connected to your gender. But if we don't confront ourselves with gendered activities that the city produces and reproduces, the structure of power in society and how its organized certainty remains hidden because we accept human made structures as natural or even neutral processes (Sandberg and Rönnblom, 2016, p. 1752). But how are we supposed to fight the power dimensions and change gender compositions?

Solution

I argue that there are two main indicators for a new approach that gender equalize a space. The first indicator implements the question: What political engagement is the most sustainable? As Sandberg and Rönnblom mentioned, a municipal engagement like in Umeå often doesn't have the biggest influence on a wider range and rather leads to small changes within spatial boundaries. Instead, we want a prominent discussion about it on different institutional and political levels. This leads to the second indicator. In my opinion, sustainable achievements would happen if there were subsidies to cover more research methodologies that ascertain gendered activities in space through social and phenomenological qualities. Just like Tera Bissett argues in her work “Human Scale” (Bissett, 2022, p. 53) where she talks about the standardization of designing and how the standard in space

protects and determines the human body at the same time. We only find out what a gender equal space needs if we start to capture the expression of women and queers. But not only the research design is equivalent, also the “who” does the research when entering a new study about spatial inequalities is important.

While looking at different research methods that present different strategies to tackle power dimensions in space I came along the concept of “Gender-transformative Research”, designed by three women above all Margo Mullinax. Their work is called: “Using Research for gender transformative change, Principle and practice”, where they introduce you e.g. to a continuum of gender integration when it comes to research terms (Mullinax, Hart & V. Garcia, 2018, p. 8). Also, they conclude how to evade an influence of still present unequal capacities of marginalized groups. They also made kind of a checklist for funder practices and institutional systems that want to support Gender-transformative research. E.g. funders are requested to use funding to reshape knowledge about creation norms and shift ownerships of research to local communities to achieve a wider pallet of participators. In the same time institutions are corresponded for a wide focus on gender-transformative work and organize frameworks that define, exemplify, and provide guidance on gender-transformative research (Mullinax, Hart & Garcia, 2018, p. 6).

Resume

So, here's the deal - our spaces are still stuck in the clutches of old-school patriarchy, silently perpetuating gender inequalities. Umeå tries to break free, and while it's a cool effort, it highlights the limits of local action. We need to zoom out, spark up a bigger conversation about gender equality in how we plan our cities. It's not just about recognizing gendered behaviors in space; it's about making these power relations a political issue. We need to shake up the conversation, break down assumptions, and challenge the things we take for granted in our spaces.

Two big moves can get us there: First, we need a political engagement that goes beyond local boundaries. We need total spans of institutions and policies to be involved. Second, throw some serious cash at researchers and let them dig into how gender plays out in our spaces. But it's not just about the research design; it's who's doing the research that matters. Enter "Gender-transformative Research," where Margo Mullinax and crew lay down a checklist for funders and institutions. We're talking sustained funding, flexibility, and reshaping the way we create knowledge. Institutions need to get on board, embracing a more democratic and collaborative vibe.

In a nutshell, making our spaces truly gender-equal or even neutral is a team effort. Let's ditch the old norms, smash those barriers, and build spaces that scream equality for everyone. We must politicalize gendered power relations to create gender justice in space!

References

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Visualization

Lev tunnel in Umeå, Sweden

<https://www.umea.se/images/18.19a41f3a17567e789efe84/1603992867467/lev-gr%C3%B6ntunnel-960.jpg>