

SCALES OF CONCERN

Feminist Spatial Practices

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*There is no space without concerns.
Without concern there is no space.*

These two sentences describe the fundamental relationship between space and concerns addressed by this essay in order to reflect upon feminist spatial practices. For the present context, I suggest reading the first sentence as follows: there is no space that does not cause human beings to have concern, that does not fill them with feelings of apprehension or anxiety. These concerns and anxieties can have a wide variety of causes, from financial debt or extreme weather phenomena to domestic violence, to cite just a few examples. I would like to read the second sentence in the context of this essay's reflections as follows: without activities and actions of concern, the space in which people find their existence and livelihood cannot exist. Concerns, the plural of the noun "concern," and to concern, the infinitive of the transitive verb "concern," are assumed in this essay to be the two basic starting points from which relations of existence are thought. Without space for their lives, human beings cannot exist. Space thus determines existence, is existentially decisive. This gives cause for concern. The life of human beings, which is always a living together with other human and nonhuman beings in their environments, takes place in the concern-filled, human-made space of Planet Earth. When concern (caring) is not sufficient, the concerns (fears and deep anxieties) grow.

"There is no space without concerns" and "without concern there is no space" express both the starting point and the permanent situation for feminist spatial practices.

Feminist Spatial Practices in the Relationship between Space and Concern

Concern suffuses the corporeal, spatial, and material world, which is the same world that suffuses thinking and feeling life with concerns. This essay therefore situates feminist spatial practices in the relationships between space and concern and is about the inextricably intertwined, interdependent, interpenetrating connections of the meanings of concern, of expressing care, and of being in state of anxiety.

Theoretical traditions of intersectional Marxist feminism provide the foundations for an understanding of space and concern that is grounded in knowledge of the restoration, reproduction, of space. Space is not, as a Cartesian understanding has suggested, simply there. Space is not only—as Marxist traditions of thought see it, especially those that follow Henri Lefebvre's theory of social space—"produced."¹ Space always requires reproduction as well.² The way in which space can be provided determines what concerns space gives rise to, but also what concerns space is capable of giving to those who live with it.

Concerning, that is, caring, includes many different activities and measures, such as daily cleaning and the long-term maintenance of buildings, but also struggles against demolition, speculation, or resource extraction. Without activities and actions for sufficient concern, people begin to suffer from the space that surrounds them. The lack of concern for the space has existential, life-changing consequences, of which I mention only a few here. People cannot breathe well. People do not have access to adequate water supply. People cannot sleep well. People cannot take good care of themselves and their neighbors. Lack of concern leads to constant concerns. Lack of concern leads to shortened life expectancy. Lack of concern leads to a systemic threat of life.

It Is Not about “Great” Women Architects, but about Survival in Freedom

When we talk about feminist spatial practices, we are essentially talking about existential dimensions of space that must be cared for so that people can care for themselves and others in it. This has nothing to do with a system-conformist and advancement-oriented feminism that seeks success in the existing space and its economic and political orders and regimes of power. In the words of the decolonial feminist thinker Françoise Vergès, these types of feminism are to be understood as “state feminism” or “entrepreneurial feminism” that aim for integration into the capitalist androcentric world.³ Feminist spatial practices, as understood here, are not based on using the tools of architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning, or urban design for the success of individual women architects or planners. It is not about the question of “great” women architects or planners. It is not about individual success as a measure of assertion and recognition in the prevailing social conditions, which, in continuation of the idea of individuality and autonomy as a subject blueprint for career feminists in neoliberal capitalism, at the same time always serves precisely these prevailing conditions, since they are thereby recognized and reproduced.⁴ The feminist political theorist Nancy Fraser has pointed to the structure of this dilemma, that feminist goals, such as the struggle for women’s access to the labor market, have served the development and expansion of capitalism without intending to do so.⁵

This dilemma needs to be fully addressed by researchers working on issues of architecture and space in their investigations and research in order to present differentiating analyses of feminist spatial practices and those that provide for social reproduction of and through space, thereby making them more understandable, especially with regard to the further development of feminist spatial practices themselves. Traditional architectural historiography, oriented toward epistemic models of disciplinary art history, was focused on those specifics that constitute a style, such as a distinct formal language or preferences for certain materials. This style is then assigned its most essential proponents, who have a canon-forming effect. Style speaks through authors. This model, which is also to be criticized on the level that historiography is understood as a sequence of positions of individuals to be canonized, is inadequate for the investigation and analysis of feminist spatial practices. This is true because, on the one hand, it is necessary to explore

how they deal with the fact that there is no space without concerns, and without concern there is no space. On the other hand, it is necessary to find out in which way feminist spatial practices are entangled in such dilemmas, as Nancy Fraser has pointed out, and which possibilities of transformation practitioners and researchers can imagine together. Although decisions for form and material are always specifically situated, feminist spatial practices are, of course, highly relevant from the point of view of the relations between space and concerns, and thus cannot be written as a history of style, nor as a social or environmental history, but rather need new complex procedures of involved and transformative research and historiography as a source of inspiration for future feminist spatial practices.

Feminist spatial practices are multidimensional and multifaceted expressions of thinking and acting, with an aim to build spatial justice and enable better caring in a world defined by ideologies of injustice and regimes of inequity. This does not mean that this world can be left behind to build another, as modernism strove for with its real-world metaphor of the *tabula rasa*. Rather, it means working with the concerns that the human-made, built world presents in such a way that repair and reparation move toward convergence. It also means that freedom, which comes from the capacity to take good care of all the conditions of the possibilities of life and survival and their permanent reproduction, takes place in solidarity with the built and material structures that support this connection. Audre Lorde (1934–1992)—in her self-designation as Black woman, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet—wrote about the causal connections between freedom and survival. Connecting freedom and survival through feminist spatial practices based on spatial concern for human and nonhuman living beings, as well as for so-called inanimate matter, builds on Lorde’s call to work toward a future in which all people in the world are free.⁶ Only when there will have been concern, will there then be freedom and survival in the world. This leads us to Planet Earth as a human-made space.

Planet Earth: Human-Made Space

The term “human-made,” as a synonym of the adjective “anthropogenic” (Greek: *ánthropos* = human; *génesis* = emergence, procreation), is essential in order to understand the relationship between space and concerns. “Anthropogenic” is the term used to describe all direct

or indirect human-made interventions that have radically altered and successively endangered and destroyed Planet Earth and its surrounding atmosphere since the late eighteenth century, since the confluence of the Enlightenment and industrialization. In her 1980 book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, the ecofeminist philosopher and environmental historian Carolyn Merchant traces the history of ideas that led to viewing nature as controllable by human knowledge and Planet Earth as a storehouse of raw materials available for exploitation.⁷ The beginning of the human-made geological era has been dated to the last third of the eighteenth century by the atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and the biologist Eugene F. Stoermer, who introduced the term “Anthropocene” into discourse in 2000 as a designation for this new geological era.⁸ The current climate catastrophes are human-made. The human being is to be understood as a geophysical power, as a geosocial being, and Planet Earth as a human-made space, which, as I would like to put it here, does not exist without concerns, without extreme anxiety, and without responsible care. Understanding Planet Earth as a space of concerns leads us to the question of scales of concern and of changes to be made by human beings to the existing human-made conditions.

Scales of Concern

“Scale” is of interest to feminist spatial practices in the context of the entanglement of space and concerns because it allows us to clarify scientific, spatial, social, and ethical implications. The tool used is a scale to measure space. Scale makes it possible to bring a space to representation in different proportions that have a corresponding relationship to reality. As a tool, scale is exemplary of the history of the scientification and measurement of what has historically been conceived as the “nature” of the planet. Therefore, as a tool, scale is deeply enmeshed in the history that has produced the planet as a human-made space with its systemic and violently eruptive crises. From the perspective of the living environment and the history of ideas, “scale” denotes a guideline, an applicable social norm or standard. What

these levels of meaning of “scale” have in common is that they put into the world possibilities of normalization, normality, and standardization that powerfully and violently transform space. In ethical and moral terms, therefore, scale is as enmeshed in the violent nature of prevailing conditions as the mathematical surveying tool. The memory theorist Michael Rothberg has introduced the notion of the “implicated subject,” who is actively involved or enmeshed in prolonging the legacy of historical violence in the present and perpetuating the structures of inequality that cause suffering in the present.⁹ I propose to also conceptualize the human-made use of physical and intellectual tools, such as scales, as “implicated” in Rothberg’s sense, so as to grasp the enmeshment of human beings in human-made space, on the human-made Planet Earth, through the use of their tools, which are to be critically examined as to their historical implications.

In the context of feminist spatial practices devoted to the relationship between space and concerns, scales are contested. Other scales of concern must be fought for: other scales to organize and pay fairly for reproductive labor that restores space; other scales to halt climate collapse and counter the global “sixth mass extinction”; other scales to counteract land sealing; other scales to realize the fundamental right to housing. It is necessary to continue to fight against scales whose historical legacy is being violently actualized in the present and is thus preventing freedom, which must be based on a redefinition of the relations between space and concern, from continuing in the future.

Precisely because of their significance for the human-made world, scales are key spatial and social tools for changing this very human-made world and for continually redefining and reestablishing the relations between space and concerns. My proposal to think of scales of concern for feminist spatial practices thus assumes that becoming aware of the implications of and the responsibility for the interrelationships of human-made space and concerns is central to understanding the causal conditions for possibilities of existence, survival, and freedom on Planet Earth and to working on transformative, life-enabling, and space-caring changes.

1 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, 1991). Originally published in French as: *La production de l'espace* (Paris, 1974). In German-speaking sociology, Lefebvre's reflections on the social production of space as a counter-model to neutral Cartesian space have been popularized above all by the work of the sociologist Klaus Ronneberger and the spatial sociologist Martina Löw. In urban activism, especially in "Right to the City" movements, the Marxist ideas of Henri Lefebvre, as well as of David Harvey, were central. The realization, based on feminist insights, that the social reproduction of space also needs to be recognized and theorized has been sidelined by the focus on production that characterizes overall the hegemonic androcentric reception of the ideas of Marx and Engels and has not been a central part of these debates. **2** The anthology *The Social (Re)-Production of Architecture* should be cited here as one of the few significant examples of the development of a practice-fed theory of the social reproduction of space: Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal, eds., *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture: Politics, Values and Actions in Contemporary Practice* (London, 2017). **3** Françoise Vergès, *The Wombs of Women: Race, Capital, Feminism*, trans. Kaiama L. Glover (Durham, NC, 2020). Originally published in French as: *Le Ventre des femmes: Capitalisme, racialisation, féminisme* (Paris, 2017). **4** Picking up on the diction of the 2013 book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* by Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook and, in 2017, the fourth most powerful woman in the world according to a ranking published by *Forbes* magazine, this type of neoliberal capitalist power feminism is called "Lean In" feminism. The Black feminist theorist bell hooks has called Sandberg's position "faux feminist." **5** Nancy Fraser, "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History," *New Left Review* 56 (2009), pp. 97–117, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii56/articles/nancy-fraser-feminism-capitalism-and-the-cunning-of-history> [accessed in March 2022]. **6** Audre Lorde, "Conference Keynote Address: Sisterhood and Survival," *Black Scholar* 13 (1986), p. 5. **7** Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York, 1980). **8** Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene,'" *Global Change Newsletter* 41 (2000), pp. 17–18. **9** Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, 2019), p. 1.