

On building feminist cities



Katrina Johnston-Zimmerman talks about why we need to pay attention to who designs our cities.

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As told to Uli Beutter Cohen, 1749 words.

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We are sitting in the Austin Central Library, which feels very fitting for a conversation with an urban anthropologist. I'm also pleased to report that this library is packed.

Oh, more and more people are using libraries. A lot of them are millennials, and I'm just going to come out and say that I'm a Millennial, too. We might think of technology as a fix for a number of things, but we value face-to-face conversation more than anything else. That's why we see the proliferation of coffee shops. We call that a gentrification issue or a hipster thing, but it's happening because we like to be around other people. We are social creatures and we are certainly hurting ourselves when we do things that increase individual pods and the problems they bring. I was in Halifax last weekend for a conference, and I was just blown away that it was held at their new library which has stadium seating, big screen projection-everything. It's part of the community and people can get all kinds of information they need to be a citizen.

Observing people in cities is your job. What fascinates you about it?

I have a background in anthropology and urban studies and I'm interested in one very specific thing: how do we relate to our environment and how does it influence our lives? I had my a-ha moment when I realized that we have not always lived in cities. We have been urbanized for like 30-seconds of a 24-hour day. Now, we are a majority urban species with most people on this planet living in cities and that's only going to rapidly increase over time. We need to look at our cities as our habitat, not as some company-owned, capitalist machine. It's an ecosystem and we need to be thinking of it like that.

I decided to focus on public space, which is defined as the space between buildings. Everybody moves through it or lives in it, because depending on who you are, it could be your home. It's where we meet people and interact. Public space impacts our health in so many different ways. We've been able to measure that just walking by a park can dramatically improve your quality of life. When you walk by a tree or just see a tree outside the window, your levels of good hormones spike. This is a scientific thing we know about, but our cities are not governed by our knowledge of them.

You're specifically an advocate for women-led, feminist cities. What inspired you to start doing this kind of work?

I came across Holly White and Jane Jacobs, who were pioneering urbanists in the '60s. They weren't called that because they weren't officially trained. But they saw problems in our cities, and they talked about it. I was inspired by their work and wanted to bring it into the contemporary space.

As an anthropologist, I am a humanist. It's how I view everything. We're the same species and are all in this together. But it's a tricky thing to tackle because cities are messy and humans are messy. So, before you get to humanism, you have to understand inequity. Women are more than 50% of the population and it wasn't until 1980 that the first woman got her degree in architecture in the US. Our influence over cities has never been felt quite like a man's. If you look out your window, everything you see was primarily designed and shaped by mostly white men. You have to think about who is in charge of your life, how that impacts your life, and what it would be like if it was different. Our earliest cities seemed to be more egalitarian. Something happened, and for the rest of our time, women have never been in charge.

Any cities you would call great role models?

No country or city is perfect, but Nordic countries have been doing certain things right. They show some of the greatest levels of gender equity and they also have the happiest city rankings. I look to them and their feminist planning projects, which comes down to gender equality. For a very long time, I didn't call myself a feminist because of the stigma that comes with it. That's why some people call their policy a gender equity policy. The city of Vienna had a gender mainstreaming policy. I think the United States is finally getting there because of the "Me Too" and other movements that have been happening the last year.

What kind of feeling or experience do you want to create for a citizen of a feminist or humanist city?

I'll give you the example of safety versus security in the public space. In a secure place, you'll see cameras or police presence. It's centered on defensive architecture that tends to be very stark. You feel different in a space that's dominated by security and things seems a little out of place. Some people actually can't spend time in those spaces because they are undocumented or discriminated against.

In a feminist city, safety is created by a lot of diverse people being around. Rather than relying on technology or law enforcement to identify problems, the community can self-identify and prevent problems. From the start, diverse people are taking ownership and no one feels like an outsider because no one is ostracized. The level of comfort would be such that you could lay out a towel, go to sleep, and it would be totally fine. Washington Square Park in New York City is a great example. People play in the fountains even though you are not supposed to, but no one is yelling at anyone. There's a sense of freedom.

It is easy to forget that cities are intended to create comfort and ease for people. Especially now, where land seems to exist for the benefit of developers.

Yes, and we see a lot of people without a permanent address, especially in cities where the developers are moving in like Austin, Texas or Portland, Oregon. I won't lie when I say that's linked to capitalism. The way we structure our society is by growth. Rather than thinking about constantly increasing profit, we need to be thinking about constantly improving lives. That is what it comes down to. What it takes is a reshaping of priorities.

Cities feel justified in what they're doing by catering to large businesses, because they think it will make their cities more attractive—like autonomous vehicle technology being the next, greatest thing. Think about Maslow's hierarchy of needs. We need to think about the basics first. We need to give people that permanent address. We need to give them the green space that makes them healthier. We need to stop the recurring cycle of trauma and poverty in communities that have been purposefully segregated for decades. Right now it's like hitting someone over the head with a hammer when we need to be loving.

You're in a fairly new industry and are up against a lot of outdated thinking. Do you have advice on how to keep going when you don't see the answer right in front of you?

It's pretty hard, I'll admit that. There are some days when I really don't feel like tweeting. But it's a very interesting world to be in because urbanism includes transportation, planning, design, and architecture. I would say that a lot of it is about seeing what sticks. I thought this feminist city idea was crazy when I started it. Once I put it out there, people in support of it came out of the woodwork.

Dolores Hayden started talking about the feminist city back in the 1970s. I'm not the first person to think about it, but I feel like acting on it. And I'm trying to create a platform for all the women who have thought about it, so that we can get together and come up with best practices. With climate change and everything else that we are facing, we really have to get serious now. It's going to take all of us and I want to bolster women's voices as fast as possible to improve that process.

People who do mission-driven work often feel like their world is on fire. How do you deal with urgency while taking one step at a time?

Welcome to my life. I'm in that exact situation at the moment, because everyone just wants to "run with it". My strategic approach was to create a pilot program so we can test the concept for a conference that, for the first time ever, brings together women who work in different areas of urbanism and opens up a conversation with the city. We needed to test it, in order to then replicate it, and eventually package it as a kit for women who want to hold the conference in their city.

We have to remember that what matters is doing the work versus worrying about the work. Do you have any advice or reminders that keep you going?

When I was in Sweden, a woman gave me very good advice. She said: "You have to kill your ego. Understand that if you die tomorrow, your work will continue." Do what you can while you're here. It's not about you and your message. It's about sharing the message with other people. That will lead to culture change. And culture change is the whole point. If I tell you something, and then you tell someone else, and they tell someone else, and then it becomes normalized in society—that's culture change. It just takes talking. Sometimes for a long time.

Katrina Johnston-Zimmerman recommends:

City: Rediscovering the Center by William H. Whyte is one of my favorite books on the subject. It's a thick book, so if you don't want to read it you can just watch [The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces](#) on YouTube. It's a really cute, short documentary.

The Ascent of Woman is a great series on Netflix about the power struggle of women over time.

Go people watching in a public space. Setha M. Low said it best. Being on the plaza and really taking it all in, that's where I find the most joy. Just watching humans interact with each other in the public space—it's the most beautiful moment.

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