

# A Feminist Approach to Promoting Social Sustainability

Bettina Werner and Amalie Gammelgaard show how to achieve inclusive urban spaces



**A**ll forms of urban planning draw on a cluster of assumptions about the ‘typical’ urban citizen: their daily travel plans, needs, desires, and values. Shockingly, this citizen is a man. A breadwinning husband and father, able-bodied, heterosexual, white, and cis-gender.’ (Leslie Kern *Feminist City*, 2020).

Historically, feminist and urban scholars have made research contributions about gender and the city. These contributions highlight one issue in particular: there is a continuous need for further research, acknowledgement and examples of feminist urban planning, and engagement with gender.

Unfortunately, examples of urban interventions that specifically address gender are few. Even though urban planning is more participatory in relation to citizen engagement, statutory planning processes have limited influence on different communities within a city. Scholars and organisations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organisation have published and suggested methods, frameworks, checklists and other tools targeting gender awareness and sensitivity in the urban planning agenda. However, this knowledge seems to get lost in translation when attempts to realise these theories and ideas in real-life urban interventions are carried out by planners, architects and other city makers.

The project Buens Torv is one attempt to emphasise existing knowledge about gender in urbanism, and to foster social sustainability in the local community. Social sustainability has arguably received less attention in public discourse than economic or environmental sustainability. Social sustainability addresses wellbeing on a societal scale, including factors of equity such as welfare, education and equal opportunities, as well as social cohesion and gender equality. Inclusive design processes and community engagement are cornerstones in designing for social sustainability. It is important to understand how to build community in the design process and enhance opportunities for community members to exercise democratic participation in the decisions that concern them.

A feminist approach to architecture and urban design emphasises intersectionality – the interconnected nature of

1 The painted stairs during Carpark Festival



social categories such as race, class and gender – and our embodied experiences when visiting both familiar and new places. Feminist architecture actively seeks to design and co-create spaces with women, non-binary people and other marginalised groups (racially, socially or economically), with a strong belief that such a design will benefit all users of the space and promote social sustainability.

In a collaborative project with social entrepreneurs URBAN13 and architecture firm AIMbyliv, COurban design collective are developing a pilot project on the border of Copenhagen and Frederiksberg municipalities. Under the main highway bridge Bispeengbuen, Buens Torv, which loosely translates as ‘the bridge square’, is an attempt to create physical interventions in a public space based on a feminist theory of design, architecture and planning, giving careful consideration to continuous citizen involvement in the process, with a strong emphasis on women and girls’ use of the space.

Whilst we often refer to women and girls’ experiences of public space, we are of course aware that trans, queer and non-binary people’s experiences differ greatly to those of both cis-men and cis-women. However, similar to other fields of research, there is a lack of sex and gender-disaggregated data in the field of urbanism. In order to address issues with gender mainstreaming by continuing a binary categorisation of men and women, the project has emphasised an intersectional approach as a tool to reveal the complexity of gendered experiences, also touching on tensions with race, ethnicity, class and age.

#### WOMEN’S LIVED EXPERIENCES AND URBAN HEALTH

Women’s experiences are arguably different to men’s experiences. The way in which we perceive and behave in public spaces is determined by a series of gendered notions relating to what is expected of the body that we live in. Our perceptions of safety and trust may have a great impact on if and how we decide to use and spend time in a public space. As women, we experience safety in the city and the area that we are working in differently to our cis-male friends or colleagues. Kern reflects on the validity of such individual experiences saying: ‘While my own embodied experiences aren’t universal, I know they resonate because women have been talking and writing and sometimes shouting about these issues ever since urban life became a pressing social concern’. Besides safety, there are many other layers that play a part in whether or not we use a public space and how it makes us feel. Factors of wellbeing (e.g. noise pollution, access to green areas, active transportation) that we have encountered through our work as social scientists and urbanists enable us to define behavioural patterns, and identify areas of challenges and opportunities to improve and make our urban spaces more inclusive.

When moving the COurban office to the area under Bispeengbuen in October 2019 and observing day-to-day life in the area, we noticed that the majority of users were young men. This raised questions of how the area could become more appealing to a greater diversity of people, and it called for more formal observations, a digital survey and data recording on the users of the space to understand the circumstances that we were trying to intervene in.

Through our work with health-promoting urban design, we also know that our cities can support mental, social and physical health if the context is compelling. However, physical health is often associated with physical activity, an area where we see great variations in engagement depending on different demographic groups. Many urban opportunities for exercise are dominated by young men, and the area under Bispeengbuen is no exception. This challenge can be tackled in different ways. There could be a focus on designing other types of space for physical activities to attract a more diverse user group. We could focus on creating spaces for passive activities that enhance social and mental health for an individual’s overall wellbeing. The latter is emphasised in the project Buens Torv.



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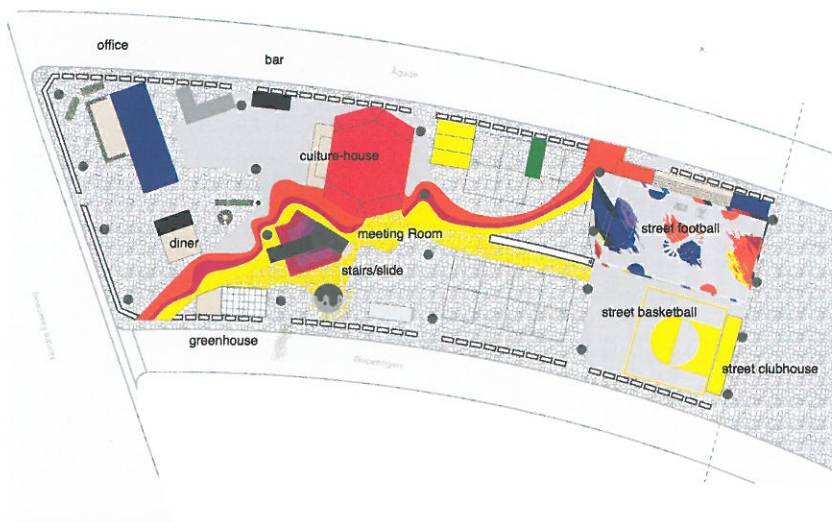
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#### A FEMINIST URBAN PILOT PROJECT

Buens Torv was created as an urban development project which, across professions, disciplines and involvement, explores feminist architecture and equality in a public space in Denmark. The area under Bispeengbuen has a history of hosting undesirable activities such as drug dealing; it is dark, concrete-heavy and it is hard to get an overview of the area. All of these would in theory make any public space feel unsafe. In the last few years, URBAN13 has been developing the area and step-by-step they have introduced more facilities and interventions. The main built features today are a culture house, a shared office space and a diner. After the first year on site, URBAN13 together with several local associations raised funding to build street sports facilities.

2 The basketball court and clubhouse  
3 Girls from Street Society have participated in the process.





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With our background in social science and many years' experience working with citizen participation, a thorough involvement process has been important from the start. We decided to gather a small reference group of some of the girls and young women already using the sports facilities in the area. As they were familiar with parts of the area, they could give important first-hand accounts of their experiences both alone and with their friends or family members. The girls and women in the reference group also represent different ethnic groups.

The interventions in Buens Torv were decided using an extensive literature review and case analyses of other projects under the umbrella of feminist architecture and inclusive design. We especially looked to other projects in Scandinavia and projects where users' experiences and desires were clearly included. On this basis, we decided on three interventions: wayfinding through signage and paint on the ground and urban furniture; an indoor meeting space inspired by a greenhouse; and, an art installation to create a more pleasant visual and sensory experience in the area. In preliminary research for the project, there was a lack of good examples in Denmark. Copenhagen in particular – often highlighted as a destination for those interested in both classic and modern architecture and urban design – lacks this particular focus.

Through two workshops we collaborated with the girls to specify the colour scheme and layout of the wayfinding information. Previously collected movement data over the area also contributed to the alignment of the paths. The same reference group was later invited to help paint the steps by the big central slide

and to give their input on the atmosphere and activities that the indoor greenhouse could hold. By summer 2021, we had painted the stairs, slide and a couple of the concrete pillars. The greenhouse is finished, and we are working on the interior. The art installation was scheduled for autumn 2021.

### LESSONS LEARNED

One of the key challenges encountered while implementing a feminist approach at Buens Torv is a general misconception of what a feminist approach can contribute, especially how it benefits the majority of users. The same is true for implementing the approach in a Danish context, where there is a lack of examples and cases to learn from. In addition, there is a general lack of knowledge, acknowledgment and data in academia, the political agenda, and among city makers regarding feminist urban design and architecture. Feminist architecture might seem like a narrow or niche perspective to urbanism, but it builds on broad contributions to feminist, anti-racist, health and gender science.

The approach to Buens Torv recognises that the urban space that we are working with is dynamically interconnected and interferes with social structures such as race, gender and class in the neighbourhood. We are aiming to create a case study of how to use a feminist approach to urban design in Denmark and, through thorough evaluation, determine which practices and methods work best in this context. Our findings so far are the need for momentum, continuous dialogue and relationship building with the user groups who are engaged. It is also crucial to build a toolbox of methods to use over time, and to allow for engagement in different forms and media. From this process we have seen great engagement in the project from other practitioners and urbanists who, like us, see the need for this approach, as well as the lack of funding and political will to explore it at a larger scale.

Ultimately the intention is to enable better community building and promote social sustainability. We look forward to diving into the findings from Buens Torv, as it can stand as a positive example for how to create more attractive and safe spaces for women and girls, as well as others, filled with a greater diversity of activities. The following few months will put the theory to the test. ●

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4 Site plan of URBAN13's area with colour suggestions for the wayfinding  
5 The new greenhouse with rendered colours for wayfinding. Photographs and illustrations: Asal Mohtashami, Erling Brodersen, Jacob Corneliusen, Courban