

Feminist City – A Place for all?

Leslie Kern: Feminist City, Verso 2021. p.412

Feminist urbanism, as a theory, has proposed several models of sharing resources in the city as a counterargument to the prevalent capitalist and patriarchal trends of contemporary society. Leslie Kern, an urban geographer unpacks different albeit intersectional perspectives to feminist urban planning in this book and thereby, elucidates the need to re-examine the profession. As such, the book is an effective primer to underlying urban issues that necessitate this approach. She begins by exploring how the city caters to the different roles played by women – as mothers and as friends. She then zooms into the individual before moving to the collective urban emotions of protest, fear and possibility.

The author draws from several of her own personal experiences – embodied, physical and social, to illustrate how women are mere guests in the urban space. She talks about how women are socialized into certain modes of restricted behavior, and how they navigate urban spaces based on this. In doing so, they fulfill their expected roles as consumers in an environment that is indifferent to their other needs. Kern avoids the entire narrative from being a single person perspective by objectivizing her observations through references to popular culture and public movements worldwide. She also duly acknowledges her privilege as a white, cis-gendered, educated, middle-class woman and the effect this has on her experiences in the city.

While Kern specifically talks about her experiences in cities in the Global North, a considerable part of the themes she unearths are universal. The lack of publicly accessible toilets in cities is a classic example. Citizens cope up with this deficit by using the toilets at cafes and pay for the access through a cup of coffee. This, effectively, excludes a significant portion of the population, who cannot afford the café's services. The global *Take Back the Night* events, *Why Loiter?* and *Girls at Dhabas* are examples of feminist collectives that work toward reclaiming urban space. *@chalkback* and *@catcalls of Instagram* accounts of different cities around the world also illustrate the widespread experience of gender-based street harassment. Several issues addressed in the 'City of One' and 'City of Fear' chapters of the book have made it to the 'Naisviha bingo', a bingo square populated with issues that trigger feminine anger, published by the Finnish activist group Cult Cunth's Instagram account.

The book primarily approaches the question of equality through the gender binary, although there is a mention of the other under-represented minorities that also stand to gain from a complete transformation of ideological standpoints within the field of urban design. She cites examples of how urban phenomena like gentrification, which are promoted as welcome changes to the urban fabric, also result in the displacement of single mothers, LGBT persons and effectively of 'the other'. The author insists that solutions already exist, and that they merely need to be identified and scaled up suitably. She emphasizes on the need to study policy decisions, especially in terms of how they would facilitate the inclusion of reproductive and care-work within the dominant socio-economic cycles of production.

The book raises pertinent questions and provides interesting insights to the interlinking of issues but does not attempt to provide a holistic vision of what a feminist city should be. But then again, is there a straightforward answer to such a question? The beginnings of an answer could possibly lie in how the dichotomy of the hard and soft issues of urban planning are reconciled in the design process. Traditionally, governments and urban planners have focused on the hard infrastructural issues while grassroots organizations have helped citizens cope with the problems that arose out of the initial neglect of soft issues. As a bare minimum, Kern calls for an

intersectional approach to urban planning, that starts from the needs and perspectives of the most vulnerable. The only way to achieve this is by the inclusion of a diverse cross-section of the public as equal participants in the design process, where they are provided the voice and agency to affect design decisions.

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