



The Importance of Urban Gendered Spaces
For the Public Realm

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Prepared for presentation at the conference on
Town Planning and Gender: A Necessary Viewpoint for All
Barcelona, Spain
27-29 April 2005

ABSTRACT

Urban gendered spaces are areas of a city identified by the predominance of one sex. Female gendered spaces are important for the public realm because they give women an identity outside the family, provide a safe space in which to establish economic independence, and offer sanctuary to female public figures. Unlike compulsory segregation that tends to reduce women's access to the public realm, voluntary gender segregation at the urban scale can enhance it. This paper identifies three types of female gendered spaces that have contributed positively to the public realm: the medieval beguinage, the 19th century settlement house, and the contemporary Mother Center in post-socialist countries. I propose that urban gendered spaces emerge when anomic social and demographic conditions create opportunities for new institutions.



The Importance of Urban Gendered Spaces For the Public Realm

By Daphne Spain

As an urban planning professor with a degree in sociology, my primary research focus has been on the relationship between social inequalities and the built environment. My early work tested the theory that compulsory gender segregation in homes, schools, and workplaces would reduce women's status relative to men's (Spain 1992). Cross-cultural data for nonindustrial societies and historical data for the U.S. supported the hypothesis. Cross-culturally, women have the lowest status in nonindustrial societies in which they are relegated to certain parts of the dwelling, separated from men in places of learning, and perform labor in different settings from men. Historically in the U.S., women's status has risen as home interiors have become less differentiated, schools have become coeducational, and workplaces have included women as well as men. Cross-culturally and historically, the greater the customary spatial separation between women and men within a building, the lower women's status in the public realm.ⁱ

My later work continued the emphasis on individual buildings, but with three variations. First, I focused on the element of optional, vs. compulsory, gender segregation. In the late-19th century, thousands of American women joined voluntary associations such as the YWCA and the College Settlements Association. These organizations allowed volunteers to gain experience in real estate management and finance, and to develop political leadership skills before most women could vote (Spain 2001).

Second, I examined buildings that were neither homes, schools, nor workplaces, but hybrid places that filled some or all of their functions. Settlement houses in the 19th century, for example, provided homes and workplaces for a small number of residents, and kindergartens for hundreds of neighborhood children. YWCA combination buildings were typewriting schools for young women who also boarded under the same roof. These structures exhibited liminal characteristics, situated at the threshold of private and public space. They were necessary places for newcomers who had left rural homes for the city.

Third, I examined these buildings in their urban context to understand their contributions to the industrializing U.S. city. Boarding houses for employed women, rescue homes for unmarried mothers, and kindergartens, libraries, and nursing stations for neighborhood children became "redemptive places" that offered safe havens for newcomers to the city. Simultaneously, they buffered the city from demographic chaos. Because so many redemptive places met the needs of women and children, the YWCA and settlement houses introduced gendered spaces into the urban landscape.

Taken together, my research suggests that involuntary gender segregation in individual buildings reduces women's access to the public realm, while voluntary segregation at the urban scale can enhance it. The purpose of this paper is to explore the circumstances under which women have successfully created their own urban gendered spaces.ⁱⁱ I review three communities in which women carved out literal as well as symbolic space in the city: the medieval beguinage, the late-19th century settlement house, and the contemporary Mother Center in post-socialist societies. Separated by centuries and continents, all three serve necessary functions and promote participation in the public realm by giving women independent identities – some quite high-profile -



outside the home. Urban gendered spaces also create safe places in which women can develop economic independence. Such new institutions emerge when anomie creates the opportunities.

According to sociologist Emile Durkheim, anomie represents a state of normlessness, a departure from the customary rules and regulations that govern daily life. Anomie results from a breakdown of social solidarity. It creates a sense of confusion and insecurity that gives rise to efforts to restore social order (Giddens 1972; Martindale 1960). The medieval city, the industrializing city, and the contemporary Eastern European city highlighted the anomic tendencies of their respective ages. Poor sanitary conditions in medieval cities produced a death rate so high that the population could be replaced only by constant immigration. The German expression that “city air makes one free” recognized the new status conferred on immigrants once inside the city’s walls. Conflicts between feudal and ecclesiastical powers made for unstable politics (Weber 1958).

The 19th century American industrializing city was also a magnet for immigrants, thousands of which arrived from Europe every year. Americans, too, were leaving farms for the city in great numbers as the economy became less dependent on agriculture. Vast income inequalities and conflict between management and labor created a volatile urban mix. The industrializing city was filled with strangers with different ethnic, racial, religious, and cultural practices. The sense of community people experienced in homogeneous rural areas was undermined.

The contemporary Eastern European city is the arena in which the transformation from a planned socialist economy to a free-market economy is most highly visible. Complicated social class distinctions have emerged based on property ownership and employment status. Women are bearing the brunt of radical reforms, earning less, owning less, and holding fewer positions of political power than men (Lazreg 2000). Repercussions from the economic and political transitions have affected whole societies and contributed to a state of uncertainty.

Normlessness can be triggered by numerous conditions, three of which I’ll identify here. The first is an imbalance in population dynamics, when the equilibrium achieved by the interaction of births, deaths, and migration is disturbed. A society can continue to grow if high mortality rates are offset by high fertility, as in agricultural economies, or if immigration compensates for low birth rates, as in many developed countries. Disturbances to an established demographic balance are often the catalyst for social and political change. High birth rates in the U.S. after World War II forced public schools to operate on double-shifts, contributed to the civil unrest of the 1960s, and are now influencing the national debate on Social Security benefits. The baby boom was an aberration in the slow decline of birth rates characteristic of industrialized countries. Much of American society today, from abandoned elementary schools to the growth of retirement communities, would be different without its influence.

Second, political transitions create instability and open avenues to social change. The Progressive reform movement gave birth to Theodore Roosevelt’s Progressive Party in 1912, a third party that advocated popular control of government, direct primaries, the referendum, and women’s suffrage. Settlement house reformer Jane Addams delivered a speech from the platform when Roosevelt was nominated for president. The Progressive Party soon faded, but it generated enough support to grant women the constitutional right to vote within a decade. In recent history, the break-up of the former Soviet Union generated considerable political and economic instability throughout much of Eastern Europe.



Uncertainty regarding responsibility for services, the third condition, varies historically and culturally. In the medieval city, the textile industry needed female labor and the old and sick needed care. The *beguinage* filled both functions. In the 19th century industrializing city, immigrants and the poor demanded public health facilities and education before municipalities provided such services, and the settlement house delivered them. In the post-socialist city, women need to find employment and support services once supplied by the state, a function of the Mother Center.

Anomic conditions exist when demographic shifts, political and economic transitions, and uncertainty surrounding responsibility for basic services converge. These circumstances create a triangle of opportunity for the emergence of new institutions like gendered spaces.

Women and the Public Realm

The public realm is both a political construct and a physical space. Those in public can speak for and act on behalf of the entire community, sometimes by overriding private interests. Only in public is it possible to legitimately use force or influence the economy. Finally, systems of inequality are established in the public arena that almost universally elevate men's status above women's. Women seldom occupy the public realm. They rarely make decisions applicable to an entire community, nor do they control the use of force or influence economic policy (Rosaldo 1980; Ryan 1990). To the extent that a vital public realm is crucial for civil society, gendered spaces that usher women into public are important contributors to an egalitarian city.

Sociologist Lyn Lofland (1998) distinguishes among three types of urban space: the private realm of the household and family, the parochial realm of the neighborhood, and the public realm of the city where one encounters strangers. Women traditionally have been relegated to the private realm. When they venture into the city, however, they are not recognized as wives or mothers, but as strangers engaged in civic life. Women in the public realm have more opportunities than those in the private realm to establish economic independence and political influence.

Urban gendered spaces can be beneficial to the public realm when they clarify women's roles outside the family. The *beguinage* housed religious women who were teachers, nurses, and laborers in the textile industry. They went out into the city for their work, unlike cloistered nuns. Because no one knew exactly what to call this type of hybrid woman, they were given the name "beguines", a derogatory term that eventually lost its negative connotation and was adopted in common language. *Beguines* therefore had an identity. They might be single or previously married, sisters, daughters, or mothers, but as *beguines* they occupied a niche in the public realm.

Women have always been present in the public *spaces* of cities, shopping for and selling goods in markets, using sidewalks and streets to reach work, and joining in religious and civic celebrations (Ryan 1990). From the 13th to the 15th centuries in the southern Low Countries,ⁱⁱⁱ women ran businesses as innkeepers, cloth merchants, and fishwives. They were an integral part of the urban economy. Yet their presence was associated with disorder. In 1360, the city magistrate of Brussels banned an annual celebration by marketwomen because it had provoked violence against men in previous years. Informal means of social control included accusing women in public of dressing too flamboyantly or gossiping too much (Simons 2001, p.11).

Despite their presence in the public spaces of medieval cities, women did not occupy the public *realm* in which the collective interests of the community were



debated and defined. To be public was to have a political presence. Women, however, could not hold civic office. Their exclusion from public office and political influence allowed urban authorities to restrict women's participation in influential trades and relegate them to the home (Simons 2001, p. 12).

Women in 19th century U.S. cities experienced similar conditions before they could vote. Women were present in public places, but subject to criticism for appearing in public alone. At best, unchaperoned women were considered potential victims of unscrupulous men. At worst, they were suspected of loose morals or promiscuity. Women's participation in political demonstrations - like suffrage or temperance parades - gave them a voice in public discourse, collectively, that they lacked individually. Occupying physical public space was the first step toward entering the symbolic spaces of political influence (Flanagan 2002). American women eventually won the vote and the right to run for political office, but the majority of elected officials in the U.S. are still men. In 2005, only 15 percent of the U.S. Congress was female and 22 percent of elected state legislators were women (Center for American Women and Politics 2005).

Women in post-socialist countries face a different set of issues. Prior to political reform, women in socialist societies had higher rates of labor force participation and political representation than women in Western countries. Subsidies for maternity leave, day care, and family services made it possible for women to enter the public realm in large numbers. The gender integration that resulted from such policies was more imperative than voluntary, however. Now that they have choices, women in post-socialist countries are engaged in re-establishing a civil society in which women's and children's interests are protected during the transition to a free-market economy (Jaekel 2001).

The form of urban gendered spaces is contingent on historical and cultural circumstances. Below I review three such places to illustrate their importance for the public realm.

The Medieval Beguinage

During the Middle Ages, thousands of unmarried women occupied roles somewhere between the religious and the secular. In 1274, a city magistrate observed that "there are women among us whom we have no idea what to call, ordinary women or nuns, because they live neither in the world nor out of it" (Neel 1989, p. 323). Their marginal status gave beguines independence otherwise impossible in medieval culture. Beguines adopted a religious and ascetic way of life, but held the heretical belief that religious practice and instruction could take place without supervision by clergy. Their insistence on reading and interpreting Scripture for themselves was a significant step toward religious reform.

The name "beguine" was a term of derision for this new class of religious women who were exempt from many of the restrictions placed on cloistered nuns. Beguines began to acquire property and identify themselves as members of a "beguinage" in the middle of the 13th century. The beguinage was typically located at the edge of the walled city. Some consisted of only one building, but many others included several buildings organized around a courtyard. It might be surrounded by walls or moats, but the beguinage was open to the community because it was the site of numerous services. It was a center of instruction for young girls and a source of charity for the poor, aged, and ill. Infirmaries were among the first additions to the courtyard



beguinage. Outside the beguinage, beguines were employed in the urban labor force, especially the textile industry. Beguinages were a grass roots phenomenon that had no central coordination or single founder. They numbered nearly 300 by 1566, and many were connected by a network of Roman and medieval roads (McDonell 1969; Simons 2001).

One explanation for the emergence of the beguinage during the 13th century is that it functioned as an “abeyance structure” for women without husbands. So many men joined the Crusades or monasteries that the skewed sex ratio created a surplus of women. Another demographic interpretation is that women were more likely than men to migrate from farms to cities in search of employment. The urban sex ratio was indeed skewed, but not because of men’s higher mortality or monastic destinations. Other theorists claim that many women simply preferred the collective life of the beguinage to the domestic responsibilities of marriage (McDonell 1969; Simons 2001). Whatever the reason, the beguinage was a novel solution to a demographic dilemma.

The beguinage offered unmarried women an identity, the potential for economic independence, and a sense of safety. It was important to the public realm because it was a destination for the poor and elderly who were ill, and for young girls who wanted to learn to read and write. Beguinages undoubtedly contributed to the high rates of female literacy in the southern Low Countries during that period (Simons 2001, p. 6). The beguinage also provided platforms for public figures in religious reform. Mary of Oignes organized a group of men who then created support within ecclesiastical structures for the secular women’s movement (the *Frauenbewegung*), and Christine Stemmeln’s male disciples also supported more religious freedoms for women (Boulding 1976, pp.449-453).

The 19th Century Settlement House

If the beguinage was a response to a surplus of women, the settlement house was a response to a surplus of teachers. Begun in England as a largely male endeavor, the settlement house movement in the U.S. became primarily the territory of unmarried college-educated women. Attending college was rare for women (and men) in the U.S. in the 19th century. Less than one percent of young women were enrolled in college in 1870. The proportion grew steadily with each decade. By 1910 about four percent of young women were enrolled, and by 1920 it had reached eight percent (Solomon 1985, p. 64). The main occupation open to educated women was teaching.

But by the late 19th century, women with college degrees faced a crowded teaching profession in a society undergoing significant economic and social changes. Women who were driven by religious or political motivations carved out their own niche by “settling” in immigrant neighborhoods to share their advantages with the poor. Cities were overwhelmed by the thousands of immigrants that arrived annually, and the settlement house emerged as a site of assimilation. The settlement house movement gave middle-class women an avenue into the public realm. They gained a new professional identity, but they also delivered important services. In the early Progressive Era, before the government assumed responsibility, more than 400 settlement houses in the U.S. provided libraries, playgrounds, public baths, and adult education for immigrants (Woods and Kennedy 1911). Just as the beguinage might not have existed in the absence of selective rural-to-urban migration, the settlement house may not have emerged without significant international migration.



Settlement houses blurred the boundaries between private and public space. They were private spaces for the women (and men) who lived there, yet they also served as neighborhood living rooms for immigrants crowded into rank tenements. Most important, settlement houses were places in which the public issues of the day were debated. Education for immigrants, women's suffrage, and public health were central items on the settlement agenda. Settlement houses provided a platform from which women became involved in public discourse. Jane Addams of Chicago's Hull House influenced local, state, and national protective legislation on behalf of women and children, while settlement pioneers Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, Lillian Wald, and Vida Scudder became recognized leaders in housing reform.

Settlement house residents offered classes to immigrant children and adults, promoted craftwork, and provided nursing services to the poor. Before American women could vote, they used the settlement house movement to influence child labor laws, improve the environmental quality of cities, and encourage immigrants to participate in democratic processes. Cleveland's Hiram House took the civic education of children quite seriously. In 1906 Hiram House established a summer camp called "Progress City", a miniature municipality in which young citizens ran elections, passed laws, printed their own money, and published a newsletter. The children learned participatory democracy by experiencing it directly (Spain 2003).

The Contemporary Mother Center

Mother Centers, which Monika Jaeckel will say more about at this conference, are a contemporary version of urban gendered spaces in post-socialist societies. The idea for Mother Centers began in Germany during the 1980s and was soon adopted in the Czech Republic. Mother Centers are grass-roots initiatives that began as communal spaces where women and their children could spend time together outside the home. After the collectivized experience of child rearing under communism, many parents wanted more influence over the way their children grew up. Mother Centers put women's and children's interests first as a way to reinforce the family and thereby strengthen civil society (Jaeckel 2001).^{iv}

Mother Centers enable women to engage more fully in society by encouraging participation in local and national governance while providing childcare. They have become "daily schools of democracy" promoting peer learning, development of job and leadership skills, and community building. Participants are re-learning democratic processes after forty years of communist rule in which free association was prohibited. Czech Mother Centers are highly visible in their communities. They sponsor traditional festivals to which the whole neighborhood is invited, and members debate childcare and environmental policies on TV and radio (Jaeckel 2001).

Germany now has over 400 Mother Centers, most of them in urban areas. The first Czech Center was founded in 1992 in Prague and 150 are currently in operation. Although many Centers began in rented rooms, they truly flourished when they claimed their own public space. The very act of negotiating with government officials for space empowered women (Laux 2003). Mother Centers have become an important alternate to the usual institutional public spaces of churches or schools. They are, according to Jaeckel (2003) "public living rooms" similar to the "neighborhood living rooms" created by settlement houses.

Demography plays a role in the emergence of Mother Centers, just as it has with other urban gendered spaces. Most developed nations have low birth rates, but



those in Germany and the Czech Republic are extremely low. For more than two decades, Germany and the Czech Republic have been reproducing fewer children than they need to replenish the population.^v A shortage of children increases their value and makes private family issues a subject for public debate. Mother Centers form a bridge between private and public realms by placing families at the center of political and economic reforms. Low fertility is a national priority because of its implications for immigration. Guest-workers can compensate for labor shortages caused by low birth rates, but immigrants are rarely granted the legal rights of citizenship. Large immigrant communities in major cities today raise the same issues of governance, service delivery, and public health as they did in U.S. cities in the 19th century.

Final Thoughts

This conference on town planning and gender raises significant issues for the public realm. I have proposed that urban gendered spaces evolve when anomic conditions give rise to new institutions. Unlike compulsory gender segregation that reduces women's access to the public realm, voluntarily gendered spaces can enhance it.

Any safe space that provides women with opportunities outside the home contributes to civil society in three ways. It offers women an identity beyond that associated with the home, which in itself increases the potential for a more egalitarian public realm. Second, it can serve as a platform for public discourse on important issues. The beguinage sparked debate over the appropriate role for women in formal religion. The settlement house was a stage for intense discussions of suffrage, labor rights, and municipal corruption. The Mother Center spawns deliberations about the proper balance of family and free-market values. Occasionally an urban gendered space creates a community of support for distinguished public figures like Mary of Oignes or Jane Addams. Third, when voluntarily gendered spaces promote economic independence, women are less likely to rely on husbands or the government for support.

Public policy can contribute to the success of urban gendered spaces by providing places for them to flourish, as the example of Mother Centers shows. Initially grassroots and independent of government support, some Mother Centers have convinced localities to grant them as much space as other civic offices occupy. Mother Centers have gained greater legitimacy as their spatial visibility increases.

Are urban gendered spaces necessary? One way to answer this question is to ask what would happen without them. The medieval urban economy would have suffered without the labor of beguines in the textile industry, and the quality of life for the poor and ill would have been worse. Perhaps the remarkably high literacy rate in the southern Low Countries would have been lower without beguines to teach young girls how to read. The 19th century industrializing city needed some mechanism by which to assimilate thousands of immigrants, a function served by the settlement house. In post-socialist countries today, Mother Centers are employment exchanges and staging grounds for democratic practices that women would find difficult to develop in isolation. Like the beguinage and the settlement house, the Mother Center prepares women for the labor force and leadership positions in a transitional political economy.

A civil public realm is at risk during periods of transition. Traditional norms governing appropriate behavior are abandoned, yet new ones take a long time to develop. A lengthy process of trial and error precedes their ability to replace the old social order. This transitional period of anomie, whether it lasts for centuries or decades,



is one in which gendered spaces can emerge. By providing women with an identity, the potential for economic independence, and political visibility, gendered spaces contribute to a vital public realm.

ⁱ I defined women's status as control of their own labor, control of property, and degree of participation in public life outside the dwelling. In nonindustrial societies, these variables were measured by inheritance rights and degree of power in kinship networks. In the U.S., women's status was determined by legal rights to their own wages, property, and vote (Spain 1992).

ⁱⁱ Male gendered spaces, such as firehouses or labor union lodges, also exist in cities. My focus is on female gendered spaces.

ⁱⁱⁱ The southern Low Countries consisted of parts of Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

^{iv} The Huairou Commission, an advocacy organization for women's empowerment through grass-roots organizations in developing and post-socialist countries, has identified Mother Centers as one of five programs doing the most to advance women's participation in leadership and governance, and in claiming public space for women. (An outgrowth of the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the Huairou Commission (pronounced "why-row") was named for the small town where a group of women met to discuss their common concerns (Purushothaman and Jaeckel 2001).

^v The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) reflects the average number of children a woman will have during her reproductive lifetime. The level necessary for natural replacement is 2.1 children per woman. Between the 1970s and 1990s, the TFR in Germany fell from 1.6 to 1.5, and in the Czech Republic it fell from 2.2 to 1.9 (the TFR in the U.S. rose from 2.0 and 2.1 during the same time period) (United Nations 1995, Table 2). More recent statistics show continued decline: the TFR for Germany is 1.4, and for the Czech Republic it is 1.2 (United Nations 2005). In Spain the TFR dropped from 2.9 to 1.4, and in Portugal from 2.8 to 1.5 (United Nations 1995, p.16). If the low birth rate has indeed contributed to the rise of Mother Centers, we would expect Spain and Portugal to be the next frontiers. They are two of only five developed countries where fertility declined by more than 40 percent between the 1970s and 1990s. That decline continues. The TFR is now 1.2 for Spain and 1.4 for Portugal (United Nations 2005).

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