

Ecofeminist Ethics for Sustainable Urban Public Space

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Abstract

Throughout history, the public urban space has reflected the city's social, economic, cultural and environmental well-being. In the broader discussion of urban environmental sustainability, however, there has been a pronounced dualism and an implicit hierarchy of value while looking at the city-ecology paradigm. This corresponds to political-social, human-nature and subject-object divisions within the western philosophy. General conversations on the sustainability of urban public spaces have predominantly used urban policies, planning theories and architectural engineering approaches to privilege quantitative aspects like morphology and energy, over qualitative aspects like experience, well-being, and equity; thus, giving greater value to the former. But in challenging such dualities, this paper adopts a critical and eco-feminist perspective, to philosophically investigate planning theories related to urban public spaces and to build a holistic definition of urban environmental sustainability for open public spaces. The methodology adopted uses contemporary feminist philosophy to critically investigate eco-feminist discussions of sexuate difference and ethics of care, in the context of design for environmental and sociopolitical sustainability within urban public spaces. In this paper, firstly, we discuss the ethic of sexuate difference while establishing that addressing sexuate difference through design can create a new way we occupy, experience, explore and perceive the urban public space. Secondly, we elaborate on the ethics of care to imply that 'caring' as a core value can create equitable spatial and community experience as well as address the micropolitics of human-nature relationship more amicably. Concluding, the paper will advocate eco-feminism as an integrative approach to achieve socio-ecological sustainability and well-being in urban public spaces.

Keywords: Urban Public space, sustainability, ecofeminism, ethic of sexuate difference, ethics of care, socio-ecological sustainability, community well being

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Introduction

In this paper, we talk about urban spaces because the future of a sustainable world lies in compact, happy, and ecological balanced cities. We specifically delve into topic of open urban public space through philosophical thinking as this aspect of the cities are at the epicenter of sociocultural life as well as environmental health of the city and there have been fewer research that address the problems in unison.

The World Commission on Environment and Development's 'Our common future' (Brundtland et al., 1987) commonly known as the 'Brundtland report' addressed the possibility for a new era of economic growth, one that must be based on policies that sustain and expand the environmental resource base. Since then, over the past thirty years, the report sanctioned development of 'sustainable' advanced urban and building technology markets, under the title of varied environmental terms like 'green', 'responsive' or 'environmental'. While there were achievements in terms of having more number of 'comfortable' energy efficient buildings and using renewable energy resources more than before, cities have not been able to decrease their carbon dioxide emissions and keep a check on rising temperatures every year (Friedrich & Damassa, 2014). Since the global acceptance of sustainable development goals, the widely encompassing term 'sustainability' has been developed, used as well as misused for capitalist and inequitable political purposes which has not necessarily ensured a good social and environmental well-being in cities.

This problem has been critically identified with diverse perspectives by deep ecologists, environmentalists, urbanists as well as feminist scholars noting a gap in the fundamental ethics of the concepts of development and planning of cities. Many deep ecologists claim that the commonplace anthropocentric approaches, which keep human needs above all the non-human and biotic ecology are the main reason for this gap (Guattari, 2000; Mostafavi, 2010; Naess & Rothenberg, 1990). Discussions in ecological urbanism, that take theoretical roots from deep ecology works of scholars like Arne Naess and Felix Guattari, often challenge the anthropocentrism in city planning and urban spaces and their relationship to people while promoting biospheric egalitarianism.

Many feminist philosophers associate these approaches with androcentrism, claiming that a masculine culture of appropriation, ownership, dominance and thus oppression of other sexes, other living beings, land and the environment, is responsible (Benhabib, 1993; Greed, 1994; Macgregor, n.d.; Perkins, 2007; Rawes, 1993; Wekerle, 1980). Clara Greed in her manifesto, 'Women and planning: creating gendered realities' adopted such a critical perspective to look at urban spaces through a different model including belief, gender, class, planning subculture, and space. The component of belief was a variable term that encompassed theories of politics, ideology, ethics, spirituality and reason (Greed, 1994). While conceptualizing her study, Greed asserted that patriarchal notions of men, women, culture, livelihood and thus identity, or subjectivity, have always supported the scientific divisions in city planning creating strong dichotomies that assign a hierarchical dominance to the former. The dichotomies in this context include, but are not limited to culture-nature, city-ecology, public-private, professional-academic, quantitative-qualitative, visible-invisible, middle class- working class, work-home, breadwinner-homemaker, economy-wellbeing, rationality-emotional, man-woman, man-other' and the object-

subject (greed, 1994). This dualism has established a sense of hierarchical verticality where feminist discourses on public space planning have highlighted this fundamental divide as the root cause of inequity in women's experience of public space. Challenging these dualisms, discourses within ecological ethics, feminist theory, and environmental ethics have called for an ethical shift in thinking about spaces and our spatiotemporal relationships.

The urban public space has been studied under the lens of notable urban theory scholars like William Whyte (Whyte, 1980), Jon Gehl (Gehl, 2007, 2011), Matthew Carmona (Carmona, 2010b), Stephen Carr (Carr, 1992; Carr, Francis, Rivlin, & Stone, 1992), who brought to light the evolution of the morphological, visual, perceptual and social dimensions of the urban public space. Scholarly works like Matthew Carmona's 'Contemporary Public Space: critique and classification' (Carmona, 2010a) provides criticisms on the emerging typologies of the current urban public space where private ownership, individualistic lifestyles, technological domination, capitalistically oriented functions and vehicular authority have rendered under managed, neglected, invaded and isolated open urban spaces that make no sense, environmentally, socially, politically and ethically.

Various studies of public spaces have generated several indicators for how a public space can be analyzed, designed and be successful. While research such as Stephen's Carr's 'Public Spaces' (Carr, 1992; Carr et al., 1992) or Jan Gehl's 'Life in between buildings' (Gehl, 2011) focuses on how public spaces are activated or deactivated through human interpersonal relations, behavior and human tendencies, such careful observations of daily life and activities in public space are nevertheless done through an ungendered lens bypassing the existing hierarchy of the sexes and reinforcing a misunderstanding of users as unsexed subjects. Leonie Sandercock, and Ann Forsyth, in their influential work of defining a gendered agenda in planning, identified three components of feminist political struggle: (1) claiming women's right to be actors in the public domain and to work and participate fully in the life of the city; (2) carving out and protecting public space for women; and (3) redefining the nature and extent of the public domain (Sandercock & Forsyth, 1992) .

Continuing thinking in this direction, perception through a combined lens of studies of feminist ethics and essential elements of ecological thinking helps to get closer to the question of equity and socio-ecological sustainability for open public spaces. Ecofeminist ethics thus offer the potential to generate indicators for rethinking our urban spaces and get closer to addressing questions of equity and ecological sustainability in public space, together. In the following sections of the paper we discuss more in depth the ecofeminist ethics that can help us create a holistic sustainability theory for designing and managing public spaces in cities. Our discussion focuses on the philosophical aspect of public space and thus tries to mend the gap of ethical framework for sociopolitical and ecological sustainability of public spaces. We thus refer to the philosophical works of scholars of feminist, ecologists and eco-feminist to strengthen the ethical perspective that helps reflect on the question of sustainability.

Public spaces and the Ethics of Sexuate difference

The public space in different cities has evolved through time and layers of social, cultural, environmental and ethical changes in the urban place. From early Greek agoras, medieval marketplaces, Renaissance plazas and piazzas, city commons, monuments and memorials, grandeur gardens, parks and playgrounds to the modern shopping malls, corporate parks, private public spaces, pocket parks and community gardens, public spaces have shown varied shades of inequity in their design and its effect on the community. The inequities have reflected in the architectural, sociological and ecological nature of the urban public space. While the urban capitalist consumeristic attitudes increased, the divide between the urban culture and 'nature' became more apparent. Along with a systemic racial, class and economic divide, patriarchal cultures have dominated the urban public space leaving women to be lesser in charge, politically, governmentally, experientially and physically. Thus, while philosophers of ecology and environment have pointed an anthropocentric that is human centric tendencies to be responsible for these inequities, feminist urban studies suggest that androcentric ways of planning and designing spaces and communities are accountable. There is a common duality that is reflected in these divides and in this research, we address this duality of city and ecology, public and private, masculine and feminine, subject and object.

The open public spaces in cities, that have been based up, employing, and maintaining the dualities of man-woman, subject-object, city-ecology, culture-nature and so on, for so long have been undermining the question of sexual difference, or rather sexuate difference. Martin Heidegger, in his lecture 'building dwelling thinking', asked the basic question "what is it to dwell? How does building belong to dwelling?" (Heidegger, 1993) exploring the question further, Heidegger's stance proclaimed dwelling as a basic character of being: a way we are in or upon the world. Through his ontological argument, his question about 'man' or the human (where gender does not enter his philosophical question), Heidegger establishes that for humans, 'being' is 'dwelling' and being, thinking and dwelling are inseparable entities. The question of 'being' thus becomes an important one while thinking about dwelling.

This exploration becomes more complex when we focus on the public space in socio-ecological context. Public urban spaces, in a democratic social setting, belong to all its human users. In this case, the place or the 'locale' connects to the individual's experience of 'being' and thinking. Distancing from the anthropocentric view, ecologically, it belongs to all human, non-human, natural entities, as a place where all the entities can coexist and co-inhabit in a shared world.

Here we refer to French philosopher and cultural theorist Luce Irigaray and her work on the ethics of sexual difference, specifically 'sexuate difference' a term that was developed more clearly in the later works of Irigaray such as 'Way of love' (Irigaray, 2004) and 'Sharing the world' (Irigaray, 2008). Irigaray's sexuate difference suggests an ontological difference between sexes (two or more), that is non-hierarchical and irreducible to one another. This difference is transcendental and relational. Irigaray suggests that this non-appropriative sexuate difference can support a culture that respects other kinds of alterity such as race, age, culture religion etc. Irigaray's perspective here presents a strong ethical argument to the question of public space which faces problems in terms of cultural diversity, racial diversity, inequitable

experience by women and environmental exploitation of the ecological land, all reflecting androcentric and anthropocentric nuances of domination of one over the other.

Irigaray explains her own rethinking of sexuate difference as the opening to thought and to life, which figures man and woman in a nonhierarchical relationship (Irigaray, 1993). This difference relates to an interval between two subjectivities, both of which are to be created and continuously reformed within this interval. Resonating with Rebecca Hill's analysis of Irigaray's ethic, sexuate difference is (Hill, 2015)

- A relationship to the self as a woman (or as a man) different to cultural presumptions
- Relationships to objects different to that learned within our traditions
- Relationships to other woman subjects and to other man subjects to be culturally recognized
- The nonhierarchical sexual difference between man and woman
- Relationships to nonhuman animals that are nonhierarchical and recognize a shared world
- Relationships to plants that recognize our interdependence and coexistence
- Relationships to the milieus of the earth and the cosmos as such as shared
- Relationships to the world as shared (Hill, 2015, p.134)

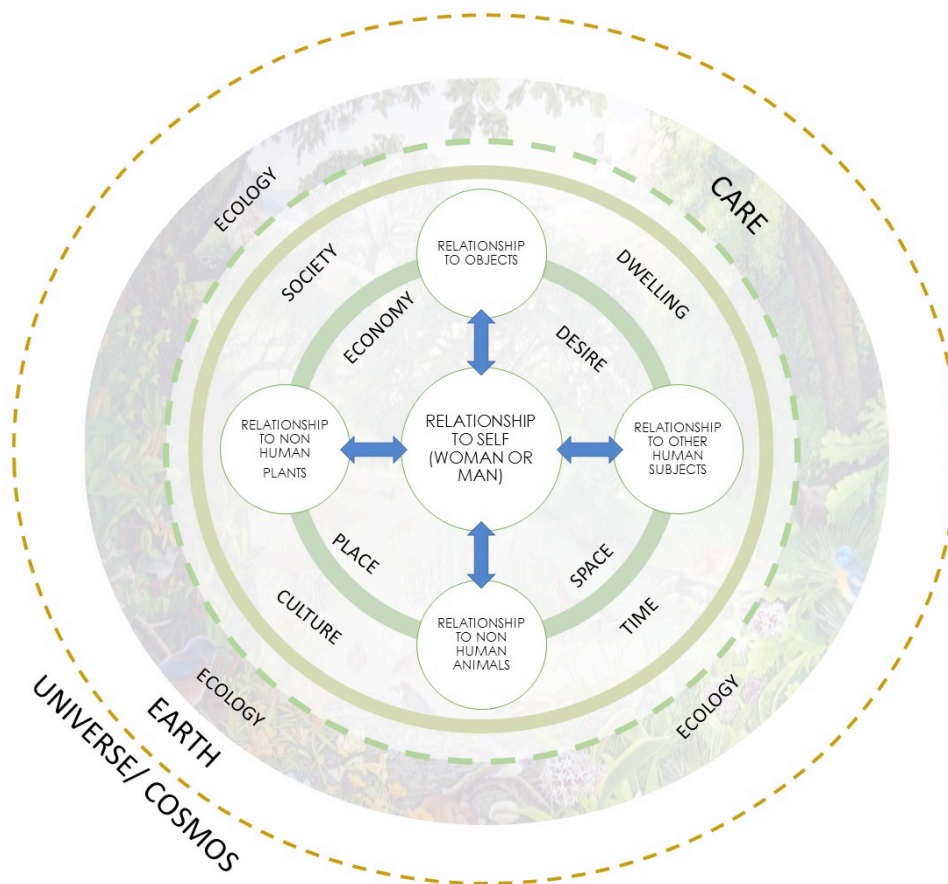


Figure 1: A non-hierarchical approach of subjectivity developing philosophy of sustainability through study of ethics of care and sexuate difference

This nonhierarchical model of difference also directs us to the relationship we can have with spaces and can help solve the problems that have arisen out of the dualisms that we, as a society have created. Scholars like Karen Frank, Ann Forsythe, Leonie Sandercock have highlighted a necessity of gendered perspective in planning and revitalizing city spaces, to counter the environmental and sociological problems, holistically. While studies regarding women's mobility, accessibility, agency, inclusivity and safety in public spaces, all over the world, reflect a stark inequity in use, cities have consistently faced fierce vehicularisation, decreasing green cover, increasing carbon footprint and disjunct between us and our ecological counterparts: birds, animals, insects and flora-fauna. A confound process of rethinking our being in the spaces, sensing our surroundings, movement from indoors, outdoors and transitional spaces and our sensibilities regarding aesthetics and engagement with the spaces is necessary to make our relationship with the urban public spaces, sustainable.

Thinking with the ethics of sexuate difference with respect to the urban public space challenges the existing ways we be, sense, explore/move and perceive beauty in public spaces. In western philosophy (Plato, Aristotle), where movement is conceptualized as a masculine and related to linear models of time whereas location or 'locale' is conceptualized as feminine and static or cyclic temporalities (Colomina & Bloomer, 1992), assignment is also reflected in the cultural appropriation of women's domesticity and indoors and exclusivity of masculine movement in the public spaces of cities. Architectural reflections of a feminine way of dwelling and moving to create material spaces have been highlighted by designers like Jane Rendell, Sarah Wigglesworth, Kane Weisman, as well as environmental psychologists like Kristen Day who have argued that childcare and activities reflecting other forms of care in open public spaces help to create this positive transformation not only as a spatial construct but social and political agency (Rawes, 2007).

Sensorily, shifting the focus from purely visual ways of exploring spaces, which some feminist argues to be a masculine appropriation of aesthetics, public spaces can be created through the senses of touch, smell, sound, thus establishing new ways of perceiving and interacting with these spaces. Public celebrating sensual activities of everyday life: experiences, like eating, cooking, gardening, dancing, music wherein it is difficult to fix on a single artist and artwork (Detels, 2006), such aesthetics can thus create a culture that shifts from the masculine object based or a neural sexed affinity towards art to a more sexuate, sublime, ethically representable and ecologically responsible public art scapes.

Public spaces and the ethic of care

Approaching the urban public space through an ethic of care is significant because care ethics in their basic and thoroughly advancing frameworks employ a combination of feminist and ecological ethico-politics. Ethics of care is specifically helpful to study women's perception and experience of public spaces because while problems with limited time, money, mobility, accessibility, opportunities, and services pose constraints to women's use of public spaces, the problem are also closely related to the ethic of care being limited to private spheres and exclusive to femininity. "the ethics of care" was developed as a moral theory signifying the fundamental elements of relationships and dependencies in human life (Fieser & Dowden, n.d.). Care ethics, in their basic form, promote valuing human connectedness as a virtue where "care"

involves maintaining the world of and meeting the needs of, our self and others. In their basic framework, care ethics seek to adopt a contextual approach in contrast to the abstract and generalizing approach in justice ethics, thereby promoting the well-being of caregivers and care-receivers in social relationships. Providing a political model of 'care' in the public sphere was Joan Tronto's 'Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care' (Tronto, 1993). In this work of care ethics, Tronto defines care in a robust political framework as:

- (1) attentiveness, a tendency to become aware of need;
- (2) responsibility, a willingness to respond and take care of need;
- (3) competence, the skill of providing good and successful care; and
- (4) responsiveness, consideration of the position of others as they see it and recognition of the potential for abuse in care (Tronto, 1993, p.126-136).

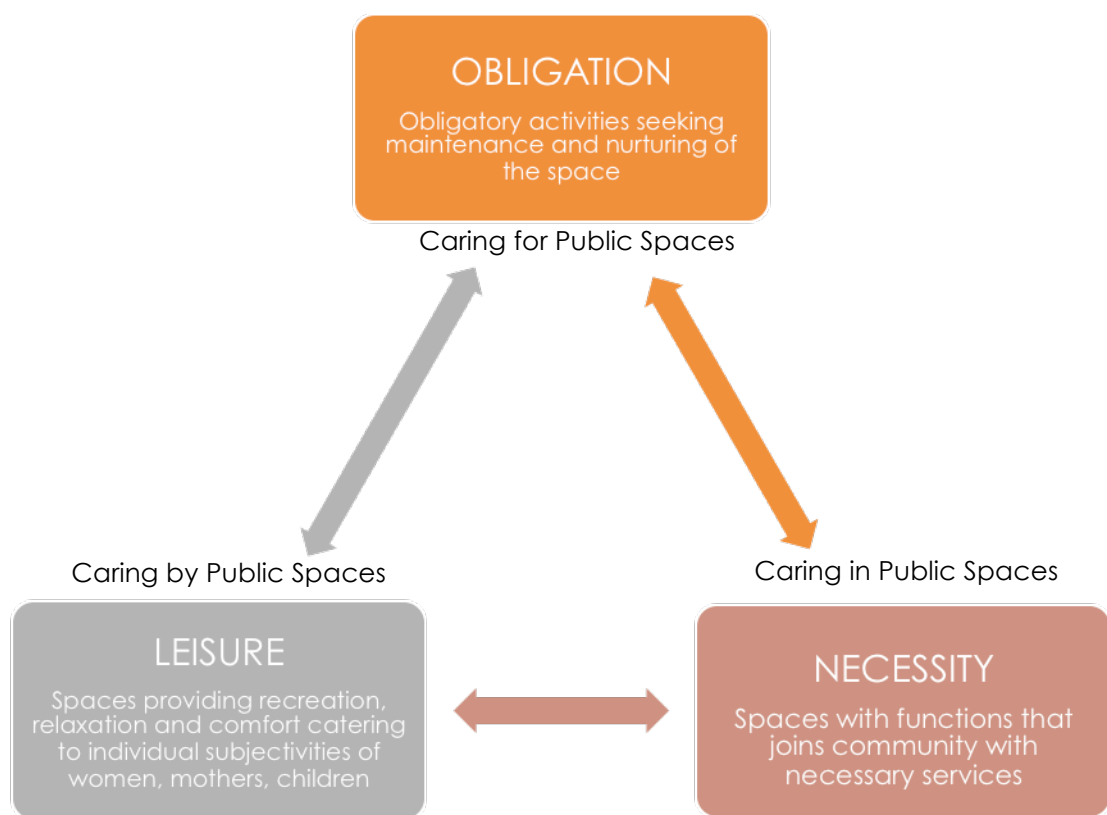


Figure 1 Aspects of a public space generated according to Tronto's ethic of care

Tronto's care ethics would politically imply public spaces to demonstrate obligation of caring for the public space, places providing all the services required by women and creating an environment that provides subjective recreation and leisure opportunities. Public spaces with politically employed care ethic will also mean that these spaces perform as a social ground to empower women through voicing their political freedoms and exercising their social rights through active engagement through community participation.

In this context, an enlightening study was Kristen Day's research on 'Ethics of care and women's experience of public space' (Day, 2000). Day's study of women's experiences in public spaces in the light of the ethic of care theory suggested that

caring acted as a constraint as well as offering possibilities for women to experience public spaces. The study established four key aspects of the care ethics that restricted women's use of public space. While constrained emotions and constraining responsibilities to exhibit qualities like caring for children, household work, caring selflessly for others, not indulging too much in social interactions that are culturally ingrained in many western as well as eastern societies, constrained resources, and social norms exhibit policies on a higher political level.

Day's research, that included perspectives from esteemed gender studies and planning also suggested that ethics of care can create possibilities for the betterment of women's experience in public spaces. An ethic of care extended to the public spaces would mean that the divide between private and public lives of women can decline and help women claim their right towards their 'citizenship'. The ethic of care perspectives of initial ethicists like Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, and Sara Ruddick, suggest caring more as an activity for immediate recipients and caregivers with the contextual relationship, which would mean encouraging community-based activities and local community engagement spaces. Joan Tronto's ethical model on similar lines seeks more political impact, which would mean public spaces as active centers of employing caring responsibilities, attentiveness to various needs of women, children and competence to satisfy those needs and responsiveness of the community.

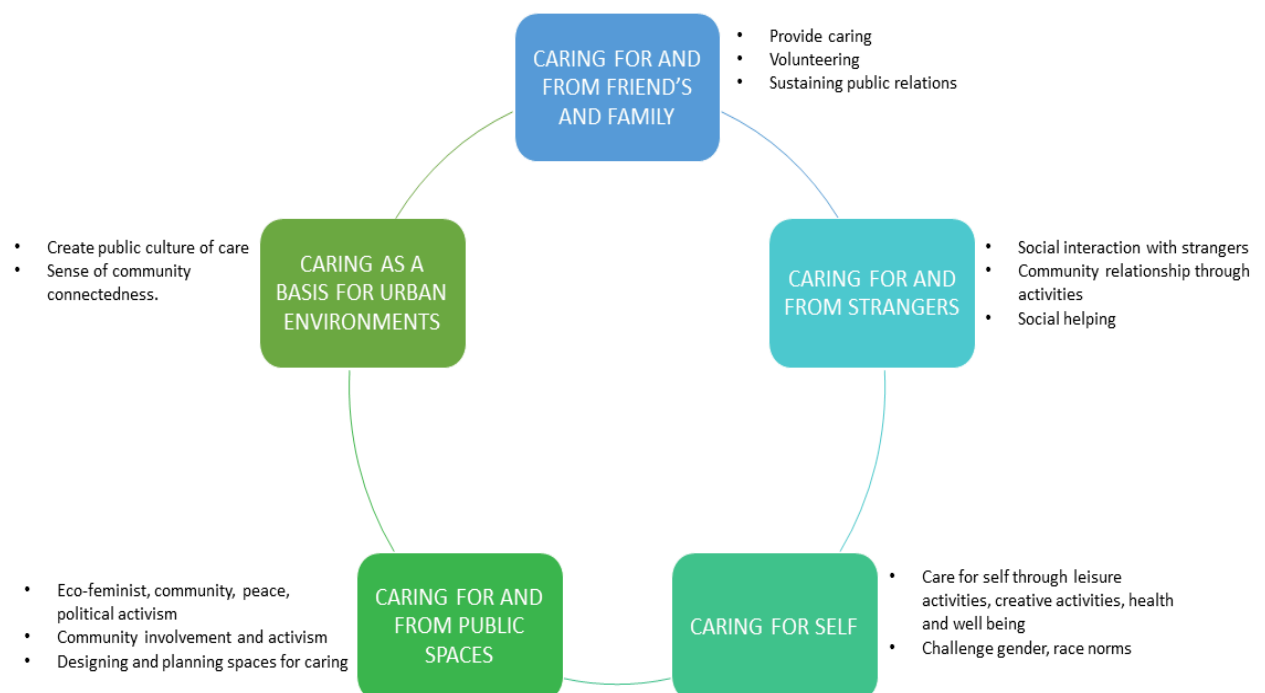


Figure 3: Illustration of Kristen Day's possibilities for experiencing and exercising care through women's use of public space (Day, 2000)

Conclusions and Implications for Holistic Sustainability

The above discussion of the ethics of sexuate difference and the ethic of care leads us to positive insights on how an eco-feminist ethical framework can imply social and ecological sustainability in public spaces. These ethics imply on a different way of placemaking for open public spaces that aim for pro-active caring as a basic value in

public spaces. Caring is mostly exclusive to private spheres and thus 'caring' as a central value in public outdoor and open public spaces can integrate better community values of hospitality and a culture of love. This can be exercised by shifting our focus making public less resource consumptive to be places that will need community attention. Public space restoration projects like Agnes Denes 'Wheatfield' in the Battery Park landfill in New York, emit a blend of such feminist and biopolitical nature of care in public urban spaces. The Wheatfield acted as a political statement by being an artwork that evokes the stark contrast of the background of capitalistic trade (the world trade center) and the foreground of a cared ecological landscape of wheat. The Wheatfield also created a space that nurtures and requires nurturing from the occupants and users. Agnes Denes 'Wheatfield' is extensively discussed as feminist and architectural ecologies of care having philosophical overlaps with ecological urbanism (Rawes, 1993). Small scale interventions like the Ecobox in Paris (Pourias, Aubry, & Duchemin, 2016) or the community gardens in Manhattan, conspired by the Green Guerillas in 1973 (Smith & Kurtz, 2003), exhibited that urban interventions on the community local level can go a long way in the ecological well-being of the city. Activities like urban farming, educational learning spaces, community garden, community kitchens, animal caring spaces, and ecological art can drastically improve public engagement with the space and evoke a sense of responsibility and belongingness for the space.

The concept of dwelling in the public space evolves through this ethical discussion that counters the duality of the indoor-outdoor, public-private and the city-ecology binaries. Urban nature connection programs that focus on place based learning and encourage a deep nature connection can (Grimwood, 2016). An eco-feminist theoretical base is also necessary to introspect the ideas of leisure in public spaces. As eco-feminist studies have pointed out, the general mechanistic worldview has regarded nature as the material, biophysical world that is controllable, available and consumable for human cultural leisure (Encyclopedia, 2016; Gaard, 1996; Grimwood, 2016; Haraway & others, 1991; Humberstone, 1998; Irigaray, 2008). This view is essentially a masculine construct of leisure which highlight the hierarchical dualities of culture being exclusive domain of men and nature being a subordinate passive entity that needs to be domesticated as women. Apparent in many typologies of malls, commercial markets, public plazas, market squares are this hierarchies of culture over nature and thus also human over ecological, making environmental well-being difficult.

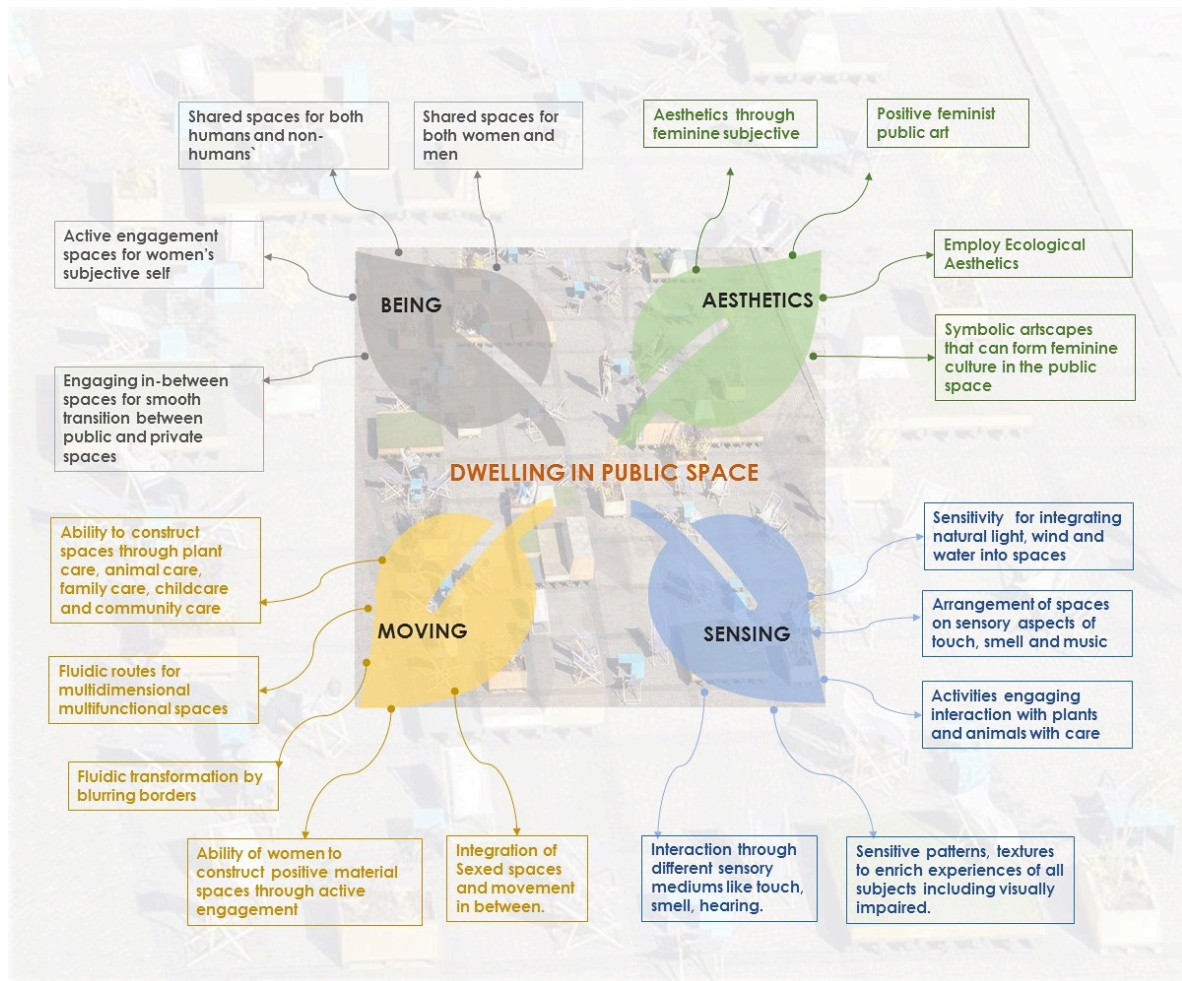


Figure 4: Thinking about dwelling in public space through care

The above figure illustrates the general implications of the ethical framework of sexuate difference and care affecting the aspects that can help dwell in public space. The ethic of sexuate difference and care challenges the hierarchical model of androcentric as well as anthropocentric domination and informs us to imagine public spaces that has an equitable balance of human- non-human and nature relationships through caring and a shared culture of love. Conclusions of qualitative studies such as Bryan Grimwood's 'Ecofeminist Narrative of Urban Nature Connection' (Grimwood, 2016) that present the experiences of women and nature based experiences in public spaces show that re-establishing public spaces with a proactive model of human nature project through learning, education and engagement not only incorporates nature-based experiences, meanings skills more deeply within urban lives but also stimulate political possibilities, nurturing and caring actions creating a more equitable urban culture and thus a more holistic model for urban sustainability.

In conclusion, an ethical inquiry into the philosophy of sexuate difference and the ethic of care lays the philosophical framework for a unique way of designing architecture, spaces and establishing their relationship with human and non-human subjects. Aspects of relationship with oneself and the other, being, sensing, moving, perceiving beauty and addressing the sexual difference, as discussed in the above demand to shift our existing paradigms of analyzing, designing and creating public spaces. The definition for urban public placemaking then inevitably starts to evolve as

a new one, as the spatial environment and its relationship to the subjects that dwell in it, adopt a language of care thus presenting a holistic perspective for achieving socio-ecological sustainability. The future of this eco-feminist perspective is developing its practical implications on urban space, public policy and implementations through innovative design interventions, thus aiming for a culture of care, co-inhabitation and wellbeing, all together.

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