

Iva LUKAN

## Feminist City

**Title:** *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World*

**Author:** Leslie Kern

**Publisher:** Verso

**Place and year of publication:** London, 2020

**Number of pages:** 225

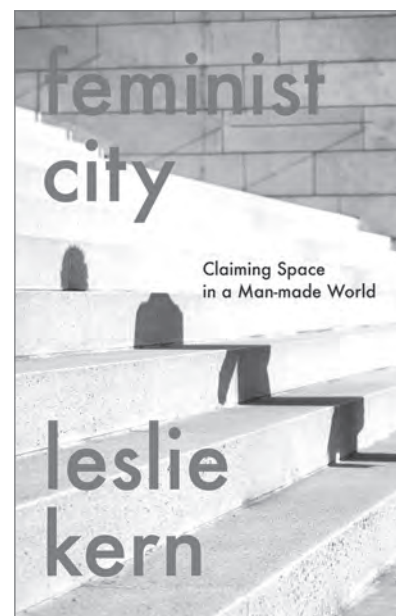
Leslie Kern, an urban geographer, researcher of the cities, and lecturer at Mount Allison University in Canada, looks at the city through feminist theoretical lenses in her book *Feminist City*. She describes the city as a place of care, friendship, personal space, protest, fear, and hope. The author combines two theoretical streams, urban geography and intersectional feminism, and offers an original view on gender inequality in practice, or, in the author's words, "on the ground". The second sex is not an abstract category created by even more abstract structures. The second sex is created by actual, material geography, which is reflected in women's limited access to (urban) space. "Any settlement is an inscription in space of the social relations in the society that built them . . . our cities are patriarchy written in stone, brick, glass and concrete" (p. 13).

Built environments reflect the relationships between the people that made them. It is no wonder, then, that in cities, as in other spheres of society, half the world's population is overlooked and invisible. However, not only does the city reflect social relationships, but it also creates them. In addition to creating relationships, the city also influences power relations and reproduces inequality. Thus, urban design shapes and determines opportunities for individuals and social groups. Kern illustrates the dialectic of depicting and shaping social

relations using concrete examples such as suburban settlements, public transport, the right to personal space, and the issue of urban fear.

Today, suburban settlements are taken for granted, even though they are a child of their time, an urban symptom of power relations after the Second World War. The suburbs were a ready-made solution to re-establish normative gender roles between men and women shaken by war and the growing presence of women in the public sphere. The overly empowered women that occupied (male) factory jobs during the war had to be re-pacified and domesticated. This domestication, however, succeeded precisely with suburban houses, which placed women back in the private sphere of unpaid care work. In parallel with the expansion of the suburbium, skyscrapers were growing in the cities, which Kern understands as "monuments to male corporate economic power" (p. 27).

The number of suburban housewives has been declining for a long time, but data still show that women do 75% of the world's unpaid care work. This fact is reflected in the mode of daily travel in the city. Men commute from home to work and back, primarily by car. Women are more likely to use public transport to commute, and their routes are complex because they consist of trip chains between preschool, school, the



workplace, and shopping. Therefore, women pay the "pink tax" on public transport. They pay much more for the same service as men because their commute comprises trip chaining, but tickets are for one-time use. Kern finds that in New York women, as primary caregivers, pay a substantial pink tax monthly estimated at one hundred dollars. The issue of public transport does not end with the pink tax. Kern draws attention to sexual harassment and the difference in body language between the sexes on public transportation. Men sit with their legs spread wide, thus occupying more than only their seats. By doing so, they force and socialize others to occupy as little public space as possible. It is similar on playgrounds. Have you ever seen a group of girls occupy an entire sports field?

*"The most that women in public spaces can wish for is that no one will notice, address, or whistle at them"* (p. 164), observes Kern. Namely, the right to personal space is violated in cities. Hence, women in the city engage in all sorts of self-restraint to avoid unwanted attention and control over their bodies and behaviour. Every city is also a city of (women's) fear of the "dangerous stranger". Therefore, women adjust their

clothing and travel habits to avoid dark areas of the city. However, the author warns that “no amount of lighting is going to abolish the patriarchy” (p. 157). Gender equality will require much more than feminist urban planning. Human relations, cultural patterns, social interactions, and economic determinants must also be changed.

Despite all the problems presented, Kern sees the city as a place of liberation. The anonymity of urban space offers women a different and free life compared to suburban enclaves and small towns. The city provides education, work, and political engagement. The city expands the horizons of the possible and, even though it is tailored for men, represents hope for radical social change. This is where the book’s main shortcoming emerges because the author remains only at an abstract and critical level and does not say what radical social change means and how to actually achieve a feminist city in practice and “on the ground”. The book thus lacks examples of good practice, which the author repeatedly mentions have existed for centuries.

Undoubtedly, Kern successfully navigates among the traps posed by identity politics. In the book, she rejects feminism, which measures its success in terms of improving the status of white, economically successful women. According to the author, such feminism introduces only aesthetic interventions into the city, which are nothing but gentrification and the removal of other, different, and deprived social groups. The book points out that a feminist city is not feminist without the poor, workers, and migrants. The author suggests that any feminist urban planning should consider not a white middle-class woman but the needs and perspectives of the most vulnerable members of society. In doing so, she moves away from her own position. As a white woman and mother, she advocates for the accessibility of

wheelchair spaces; she also fights for physically challenged or older people. When she advocates for more public spaces, she also has other races, nationalities, and classes in mind. This, in turn, requires a lot of self-reflection on one’s own position and privileges.

Physical spaces reflect and create relationships between people. We rarely talk about the urban landscape as a contributor to gender inequality. Hence the book is a welcome and must-read for all stakeholders in urban planning. In times of the #metoo movement, it is vital to consider gender inequalities in architecture and urban planning. However, as Kern points out, we need to be careful about this; all too often, this means that we understand an economically successful white woman as a typical user of the city. Such an understanding, however, brings gentrification. Feminist urban planning must therefore operate intersectionally, taking into account marginalized social groups and unpredictable social life. It must take into account all the residents of the city. “Planning from below, where the margin becomes the centre” is the future of urban planning.

.....  
Iva Lukan  
Faculty of Architecture  
University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia  
E-mail: iva.lukan@gmail.com

### Biography

Leslie Kern is an associate professor of geography and environment, and the director of women’s and gender studies at Mount Allison University. She is the author of *Sex and the Revitalized City: Gender, Condominium Development, and Urban Citizenship*.

### Information about the book

<https://www.versobooks.com/books/3227-feminist-city>