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an interdisciplinary journal of
sushant school of art and architecture

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Sushant school of art and architecture

Put Her in Her Place (Not!)

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WHY DON'T YOU GO OUT?
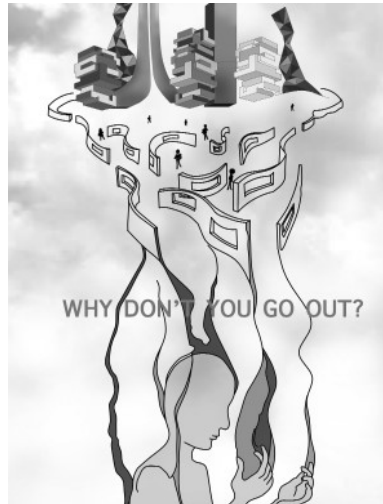
Spatial Violence and the Safety Paradigm[1]

One of the key concerns in city planning and governance in Delhi, in addition to housing and employment, is women's safety. According to Kalpana Viswanath and Surabhi Mehrotra, Delhi is one of the "most unsafe cities in the world for women."[2] That this issue is common to a lot of cities around the world can be seen in the UN Women's Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces report that presents evidence of and measures again gender based violence across 27 cities in developed and developing countries.[3] The work that is being done by *XYX Lab*, Monash University, Australia as well as *Safetipin* and *Safecity,* India is focused on crowd sourcing data on infrastructures of access and equity, as well as fearscapes based on perceptions as well as actual experiences of sexual harassment of women in the public space. This work is no doubt essential to bringing about changes in planning policies, design standards, as well as civic behaviour.

The discourse of gender and safe cities is taking a slow turn as it is now moving beyond the safety paradigm; a shared expectation and aspiration across many feminist-activist groups. In "Woman-made City: Feminist Utopia or Practical

Possibility?" Christine Hudson and Malin Rönnblom indeed agree that cities can be designed as hostile environments for women. They list "empty, 'no-man's land' between uses, badly lit streets, parks and underpasses, advertising and other forms of street 'decoration' that sexualize the urban room" as spaces that make "women feel unwelcome, excluded, ill-at-ease and/or insecure."[4] But there is more to this, as they explain why fear cannot be "designed away":

However, it is important to point out that it is not the physical environment itself that threatens women; fear is embedded in the gendered power relations in society where women as a group are subordinate to men as a group. Fear cannot be "designed away." Improving street lighting or building footbridges instead of tunnels will not solve the root causes of women's fear in public places. These lie in the unequal gendered power structures in society, where men's violence against women and women's fear of that violence play an important role in maintaining these unequal relations (* p. 77).

This is echoed by Krishna Menon in discussion at the National Consultation, Feminist *Urban Futures: Cities for Women and Girls* (2018), organized by Jagori and the Pinjra Tod Movement. Menon advocates a democratic view of the city, and values of "equality, liberty, dignity" that are enshrined in the Indian Constitution. She issues a timely reminder that "as we talk about a safe city…the conversation can easily turn into values of 'protectionism' and acquire a 'paternalistic tone.'" We need to ask why "women feel a sense of un-belonging to the cities they inhabit"."[5]

The entire point of being 'looked after' and being 'taken care of' by passive or active surveillance (data and/or human) is problematic. The passive surveillance premise and expression of "many more doors to run to" is even more troubling and sinister. The limitation of the safety paradigm is that the patriarchal frameworks that regulate women's place in the city, at home, are opposed and managed but not disrupted. The real desire is a world where safety is no longer an issue, and we are able to be anywhere, be anyone, at any place, at any time. Night is the same as day; 'after dark' is the same as 'during the day;' deserted is the same as lively. This is not the case, yet. Indeed, even if one did design in safety, how does one design out fear? Let us not lose sight of the fact that the key issue is not safety: it is women's place in society, in the city. We need only use #putting-herinherplace in Twitter to see how this phrase is used (by men) to share content that demonstrates alarming physical and emotional abuse of women in the domestic space. This shows that women's social, economic, political position in society is signified spatially, and that women may be 'out of place' even at 'home.' Being 'not at home' is obviously worse. We need to understand the word place is simultaneously the right to be in a certain place at a certain time, as well as status. This has become the departure for an exploration of the patriarchal foundations of women, space, and violence against women (physical, emotional, and sexual), enabling me to argue that acts of violence against women in a public space are also acts of spatial violence. Anne Carson's essay "Putting Her in Her Place" (1990) discusses precisely this idea that women who are mobile represent a transgres-

sion in the social order where "from birth the male citizen has a fixed place...but the female moves."[6] Carson discusses ancient Greek texts that portray women as possessing uncontrolled sexual desire, and are seen as a "fearsome thing" which "threatens the "very essence of man's manliness".[7] Woman is seen as polluted and polluting, incapable of controlling her own boundaries, whereby her soundness of mind consists in "submitting herself to the control of others."[8] After marriage, Carson considers, the woman usually moves into the man's house and the sexual drive of the woman is brought under control. This, according to Xenophon, is often interpreted as society controlling the "wild eros of women and so impose civilized order on the chaos of nature. Thus we find a fifth-century bridegroom speaking of his bride as a wild animal, which became, only after a period of confinement and kind treatment, 'submissive to my hand and domesticated enough to make a conversation."[9] While Carson's essay is based on texts from ancient Greek civilization, some of these statements ring true even for contemporary society.

Indeed, space is the means through which women are 'domesticated.' When women exceed their domestic confinement, they are punished and 'disciplined' through violence. This implies that public space(s) can never really be safe for women. 'Anything can happen at any time,' and good design cannot guarantee or sustain safety. The premise of confinement means that a woman is expected to appear and act in public spaces in a 'gender appropriate' manner, or she will be 'put in her place' through physical or sexual violence. However, the term 'gender appropriate' is meaningless; since a woman is seen as threat to herself and to society at large in a public space, there can be no code for appropriate behaviour.

A study conducted by Indian Society for Integrated Women & Child Development brings focus to "victim blaming," which places responsibility and blame on women, on what time they go out and what they wear.[10] Their research shows that women who wore sarees and salwar kameez and went out during the day also faced sexual harassment. Women reported to feeling insecure, or being harassed irrespective of their choice of clothing of the time of day. Therefore, if sartorial policing is irrelevant, how effective is sartorial rebellion? Himadri Barman's Walk-like-a-Woman initiative (part of Neha Singh and Devina Kapoor's Why Loiter? Mumbai movement) invited men to dress in women's clothes, and occupy the city. Barman's action asserts the "right of a citizen to walk freely without being questioned what she/he is wearing should be as fundamental as assured in our constitution."[11] No doubt this is an important act of reclaiming public space whilst also challenging gender stereotypes. However, it misses the mark, as clothes are not the point at all. It is about who is wearing the clothes. To imagine a post-patriarchal urban order, we have to think utopia.

Feminist Utopias: In/Of the City

Hudson and Rönnblom remind us that it is not easy to just craft a woman made city, especially if the subject position for women is/has been a subordinate one. One way forward, they argue, is to use "feminist utopias of the city as a way to stimulate women's thinking about alternatives."[12] Hudson and Rönnblom believe that "feminist utopias of the city" that liberate our thinking on "the constructions of women and men in the city" are a practical possibility, not the dream of a far away land. In their conversations with women, based on city based feminist utpoias they argue that the feminist city would value spaces that was participaroty, where "solidarity, caring and friendship was prioritized."[13]

Léone Drapeaud's "Founding the Feminist Utopia (2018)" presents a survey of feminist science fiction to suggest the archetypes of city planning that can be utilized for imagining new feminist urban utopias, because architectural history does not really offer alternative spatial/social imaginaries.[14] The archetypes are the fortress, which "creates a new context through isolation;" the city as a machine, which seeks to challenge how work is structured so that the "social status of women can be challenged and improved;" and the overlay, which is when "existing spaces are subverted, transformed and questioned, often to the point where pre-existing spaces are barely legible." The archetypes are not intended as instrumental typologies: rather, they are tools that allow us to think of ideal societies, social changes, and how that might be coded into spatial structures. However, most of all, Drapeaud's emphasizes, through Erin McKenna, one cannot let go of utopian thinking, as that is like "forfeiting one's future."[15]

A performative possibility of a feminist spatial utopia is that of loitering, a privilege of leisure and enjoyment which is almost always denied to women. Most discussions around access to spaces, and safe passage to and through these spaces for women often addresses trajectories that are functional paths navigating home, work, and care. The focus here is on performance not pause and pleasure. Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets by Phadke, Khan, and Ranade (2011) explores the politics of loitering. They argue, "women have only conditional access and not claim to the city public spaces. Economic and political visibility may have brought increased access to public space but this has not automatically translated into greater rights to public space for women."[16] They speak of "unconditional access to public space" manifested in the spatial practice of loitering, an active claim to civic citizenship. Loitering disrupts the idea of segregation and control of civic space. But for women, the authors claim, "such a space of ambiguity can be powerful" challenging "the division between private and public space, and therefore, between respectable and non-respectable women."[17] Loitering can become a feminist occupation of space where the focus is on pleasure, not purpose.

Continuing the performative challenge to women's 'place', Blank Noise (NGO founded by Jasmeen Patheja and hosted by Srishti Institute of Art Design and Technology) has launched a "public action" called Meet to Sleep. Blank Noise aims to put an end to gender based violence, and Meet to Sleep challenges the notion that if women sleep in the open, in a park, alone and unaware, they are asking to be assaulted. Between 2014-2018, Meet to Sleep has been enacted across 28 towns in India and has been performed in 67 parks. The mission statement is not only evocative, but also self-explanatory:

We sleep to create new narratives for our bodies, ourselves, and our public environments.
We, Meet To Sleep, to fight fear, we have long been taught to carry.
We, Meet to Sleep for the right to live defenceless. Trusting even.
We, Meet To Sleep, to create a new reality, through collective action.
We, Meet To Sleep because collective action is powerful and can create new collective memory.
Our bodies will, through new learnt experience, tell new stories ; located in belonging, connection, pride.
Replacing fear, shame and violation.
We Meet To Sleep, to heal. [18]
Like loitering, sleeping in the open is a provision for pleasure or comfort that is socially reserved for men. Such a project challenges the belief that if women are in a public space and unaware, they are responsible for their own safety: they are not! Society is.

Imagining feminist spatial utopias will require a rethinking of gender identity and relations as these are at the core of how women experience public spaces. To proceed it is therefore important we consider Claire Cain Miller's "How to Raise a Feminist Son" published in the new York Times: this is a new and timely manifesto on how we may rethink masculine identity, and therefore transform encounters in public spaces in the future.[19] Miller advises through her litany: Let him cry - Give him role models - Let him be himself -Teach him to take care of himself - Teach him to take care of others - Share the work - Encourage friendships with girl - Teach 'no means no' - Speak up when others are intolerant - Never use 'girl' as an insult - Read a lot, including about girls and women and Celebrate boyhood.[20]

If we can imagine more 'enlightened' masculine identities based on respect, care, empathy, emotion, and relationality, we may then exceed the safety paradigm. However, imagining spatial utopias also requires radical thinking. Alexandra Brodsky and Rachel Kauder-Nalebuff's Feminist Utopia Project (2015) presents "a range of radically inventive thought experiments that shed the restrictions

of sexist logic to spark our collective imaginations."[21] In "Day without Body Shame," Erin Matson imagines a world where the mirror no longer judges us, and we have the right to "take up space" as we want "without judgment or guilt or evaluation or denigration."[22] Our bodies "are not used to punish, or restrict us. Matson writes "In a world without body shame, artifacts used to oppress women and girls begin to disappear or transition to a new purpose. Hair dryers can be tools for keeping warm. A collection of lipsticks can be used to create the nest oil paintings. Spanx can be used to slingshot a giggling child across the lawn."[23] Similarly, in "Raising Generation E (For Empathy)," Mindi Rose Englart imagines a world where "everyone can walk down the street gazing up at the night sky, not looking behind them in fear," because they were rewarded for "empathy over defensiveness, reason over reaction, and conscience over compulsion."[24]

Beyond the Safety Paradigm
Postscript

Much of the above framed the design charrette at iPAC 2019 at Sushant School of Art and Architecture.[25] Students were asked to imagine new utopian futures of what women are able to do in a public space; challenge the dichotomy between public and private space; and reconceptualise the public realm. The design charrette was a siteless exercise, in order to avoid students making spot changes and improvements to existing spaces. The focus was on a complete re-imagination of our relationship with space. However, students were free to consider what spaces needed rethinking. The typologies available were small-scale spaces like a gym, retail store, a bus, bus stand, an office, a kitchen. They were also able to undertake a city level re-imagination of spaces and possibilities. There was no formula: it was an open field. The only imperative was that they had to go beyond the safety paradigm.

The goal was to imagine if women designed cities instead of men, how would they design them - differently. This was not only about making possible new ways of claiming ownership to public spaces, but about challenging existing social relationships and gender identities, and proposing alternative social relationships.

The mixed gender teams of students collaborated to contest their individual, collective, and mutual urban desires, and ways to negotiate these within accepted and imposed cultural norms. Students proposed a new conceptual model of the city that comprises of of private realms, visualized as bubbles that indicate security. Instead of asking women to leave their safe zone, the bubbles are dislodged from their 'place,' capable of becoming floating, mobile entities that invite others (into the private realm). The private realm is made placeless. There is no out, no in: the hierarchies are flattened.

Another group of students concentrated on the association of alleys with violence,

and proposed passages that had continuous social interaction, visual connectivity, and participation. The alley is not just a functional space for circulation and access; it also serves to build familiarity and trust. Informal urban/highway typologies like the dhaba and the theka were also scrutinized, interestingly so, by an all male group.

The conceptual design of the 'feminist theka' dismantles the front-on approach in the retail design of these outlets, thereby also dismantling the intimidating and unified 'wall' of male presence. The theka was imagined as a staggered and deconstructed form to disperse the (collective) male gaze, thereby suggesting that the 'unpermitted' and 'licentious' experience (liquor) was now within reach.

This was only a start, but a promising start. The response from the expert advisors to the design charrette suggested strongly that speculative thinking is as important as competence and practicality within the design studio. Without this, there can be no social change and therefore no meaningful design innovation possible. It became clear that the connection between space and power is paradoxical. While spatial design alone cannot eradicate fear or guarantee safety, feminist spatial utopias that re-imagine social, sexual, political relations, enacted and performed as spatial acts, are essential for getting beyond the safety paradigm. This is what will create lasting and real change.

SHE IS SOMEONE

WHO IS
MOTHER. SISTER. FRIEND. DAUGHTER.
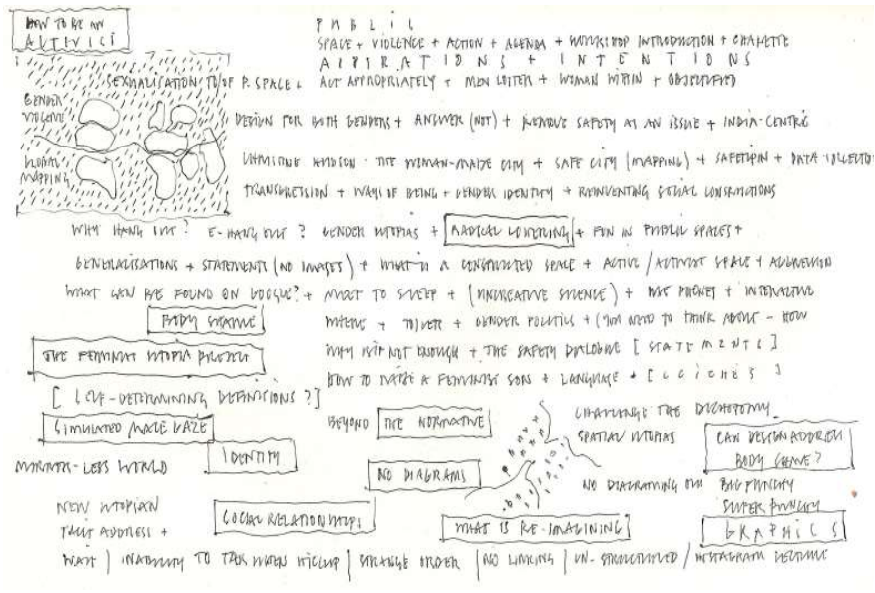
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Putting Her in Her Place (Not!) was a presentation and design charrette delivered at Sushant School of Art and Architecture (IPAC 2019), motivated by a 'turn' in the debates on gender and cities, especially the notions of Spatial Violence and the Safety Paradigm.

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Miller

21 Alexandra Brodsky and Rachel Kauder-Nalebuff, The Feminist Utopia Project: Fifty-Seven Visions of a Wildly Better Future, New York, NY: Feminist Press, 2015, 10.

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We express our gratitude to the expert advisors for the charrette: Professor Poonam Prakash (Head of Physical Planning SPA), Anubha Kakroo (Dean Outreach, IIAD), Madhu Pandit (Neeraj Manchanda Architects), and Swati Janu (Director, mHS CITY LAB).