

Book Review

feminist city by Leslie Kern

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Women in urban spaces of industrialized cities have been an emblem of danger, both to themselves (sex work, poverty) and to society (independence from men), since the industrial age began. These Western cities grew quickly, were built and guided by men, and so carried with them the idea that urban spaces belonged to men. This attitude permeated architecture and urban design in ways that cities are still struggling to understand. Leslie Kern's *feminist city* ([2020; Verso](#)) gives a historical background of what shaped our built environment and how those attitudes continue to influence it, but does not offer any specific solutions. These problems are so big – and so dependent on local support, environment and interest – that each city will have to figure out their own solutions. However, Kern makes clear points about the need for more perspectives within planning to bring to open these conversations. Her explorations of the feminine experience of urban spaces will be very familiar to those who share them and hopefully enlightening to anyone who does not.

Anyone who understands these experiences and is looking for concrete plans or ways to move towards a feminist city will be somewhat disappointed by this book : most of the text is anecdote and historical analysis. Some planning-orientated recommendations can be found between the lines but Kern is mostly offering a picture of how we got here rather than a roadmap for the future. Understanding the current context is vital, though, to be able to see why change is needed.

The final chapter – City of Fear – is a fascinating look into the social and cultural conditioning that girls get, and how it influences how roughly 51% of the world's population is conditioned to experience public spaces and the world at large.

There's no way I can do justice to the puberty years and describe all the messages girls receive about our bodies, clothing, hair, makeup, weight, hygiene, and

behaviour that feed into the bigger message about controlling ourselves for the sake of safety. This is when the volume turns up on the message that girls and women are vulnerable due to our gender and that sexual development is going to make that danger real. Instructions about appropriate behavior (how you sit, speak, walk, hold yourself, etc.) take on a sense of urgency that indicates they're not just about polite social behaviour. ... [T]he message comes in like an IV drip, building up in our systems so gradually that once we become aware of it, it's fully dissolved in the bloodstream. It's already natural, common sense, inherent.

... The socialization is so powerful and so deep that "female fear" itself has been assumed to be an innate trait of girls and women.

She goes on to explore issues of 'public fear' as a masculine, and therefore dominant, issue. The issues that women are most concerned with are 'private fears' – domestic abuse and the like. As such, they are given less consideration and space in the safety conversation around urban space design, and the issues that dominate the urban safety conversation are the "public fears" that overwhelmingly have male victims. By pushing women's safety concerns out of the spotlight they become both irrational and taboo, and therefore are not addressed in urban design settings. Kern points to the Victorian fear and cultural shaming of the "public woman" (a euphemism for a sex worker, but also implying that she is poor) as the beginning of this self-feeding spiral that keeps women in their homes, where they experience the most violence.

While this is not a classic urban planning topic, Kern roots it in the gendered classification of public spaces – parks are "imbued with a hostile masculinity," while suburban sidewalks are coded as safe. If women and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) have to be constantly on guard, we are not able to experience freedom and fulfillment. Kern makes a brief mention of the issues facing BIPOC (especially Indigenous women and women of color) in cities, but doesn't dig too far into it. While I appreciate not trying to write from experiences that are not her own, it would have been really great to hear more from her BIPOC friends about their experiences. (I certainly hope she has BIPOC friends...) If this book is a feminist perspective it

needs to include voices other than just an upper-middle-class white woman with a Masters degree who has lived in London and Toronto. There are some unique perspectives that First Nations people in particular would have to offer from their patriarchal societies. In particular, the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Sisters and the targeted killings of Black trans women are issues that need to be called out and addressed specifically in urban areas. Both of these are rooted in systemic racism and white supremacy, and to promote feminism is to also specifically address these issues.

feminist city provides historical analysis from a white perspective, and builds a compelling picture of a few facets of the female urban experience. To many readers these may be new facets, and this book may be a compelling exploration and introduction to them. For those who reach for the hope that the title presents, for information about how to move beyond the issues we see every day, this book is a disappointment. There's a lot of nodding along, but out of familiarity instead of inspiration. I agree with the online criticism that Kern could have done more to bring in perspectives outside her own, though *feminist city* is a worthwhile introduction to anyone who isn't familiar with a woman's experience of urban spaces. The level of vigilance described in the first few pages and in the final chapter on fear were full of familiar moments. If someone in urban planning has not had any of these experiences, this book is a great place to start; she presents a compelling argument, though never articulated, for the need for more women (especially women with marginalized identities) in planning authority roles.

While I had hoped for a more comprehensive look at the situation that included historically marginalized voices and perspectives, as well as more self-awareness from a white woman writing about these issues in 2020, this book could still potentially serve as a reasonable introduction that would be more accessible to the dominant palate in the planning industry. If, like me, you were familiar with these issues already and were looking for a deeper dive with some forward-looking plans you'll want keep looking.