

Changing the mould: The Frauen-Werk-Stadt model project

This text discusses in detail the Viennese the Frauen-Werk-Stadt model housing project which provides an example of planning and design based on the principles of everyday life. The article examines the process by which women successfully began to influence traditional approaches to the planning and design of a new social housing project in the suburbs of Vienna. Women architects and planners, together with grassroots women in Vienna first mobilised around city planning and women. As a consequence, they seized the opportunity to create a new template for the design of neighbourhoods - drawing particularly on feminist thinking about home environments.

The Concept of Everyday Life

The feminist concept of The New Everyday Life came into being in 1979 with Scandinavian women producing a common vision of a more cohesive future life¹. Central to their view was a shift of values from a technocratic rationality to a rationality of responsibility²; a system in which production serves the world of reproduction, not vice versa. Reproduction in this argument is not understood in the Marxist sense but more broadly as the nurturing of social and cultural relations as well as care of children and older people. Explicit in this vision is the creation of a society which redefines work and judges paid and unpaid (and therefore not valued) work as equal and which shares and organises all work in a different way without recourse to gendered stereotypes. While it is important to work for change, it is also important to acknowledge present realities. Though women are increasingly in waged work outside of the home, they are still seen as society's primary care-givers within it. It is women who suffer most constraint from poorly designed neighbourhoods and inadequate services. It is women who experience severe time and space constraints in attempting to meet all of their responsibilities in a society that does not acknowledge or support their multiple roles³.

Frauen-Werk-Stadt: context for development

During the 1970s and 1980s in Vienna there was intense discussion on the specific problems for women associated with public and private space. This debate culminated in a seminar on women's experiences of living in the city. This was followed by an exhibition about public space and a questionnaire on women's safety, which produced an unprecedented number of responses (4,000)⁴. Renate Brauner, the City Councillor for Women's Issues, recalls, "Thousands wrote in with their ideas. Many ideas were about making very small changes to their surroundings, but changes which were important to women"⁵.

This chain of events established that women had a perspective on city living which differed from the institutional views. Furthermore the scale of the involvement and the energy given by women to the process succeeded in moving these concerns from the grass roots onto the local political agenda. The ensuing political debate resulted in the proposal for a women's office (the Frauenburo) to be headed by the woman planner who had been the driving force behind the exhibition and questionnaire. In the critical role of change agent, she was able to bring women's views into the

planning and design process while ensuring that awakened demands were answered by women-sensitive policies in the city administration.

The Frauenburo followed a dual strategy. First, women's issues should become a routine and normal consideration in every department of the city council, an approach that has come to be more widely known as mainstreaming⁶. Second, a positive action approach was still needed to address disadvantage and discrimination suffered by women⁷. It was also important that policies sensitive to women's concerns should have tangible outputs. From this commitment the idea for a project emerged in the shape of the Frauen-Werk-Stadt.

The Frauen-Werk-Stadt Model Project

The project site was a 2.3-hectare lot in the northern part of Vienna, close to a densely built up area and within a corridor of land designated for development. Because the whole process was to be managed by women, the usual procedure for selecting a developer was abandoned in favour of the positive selection of the only non-profit housing co-operative in Austria managed by a woman. In the same vein only women officers were chosen to be involved in the project. It might be argued that the assumptions that only women can work for women and that all women are feminists are naive, but the commitment to positive action also embraced a strategy of highlighting the expertise of women and creating role models for others.

From the responses to the questionnaire and the seminar the Frauenburo was able to write clear design criteria for the development. The brief was to devise a social housing project of 350 housing units with "the needs of women and everyday life" as the essential criteria of design⁸. Working to a list supplied by the Chamber of Architecture, the Frauenburo distributed a questionnaire to identify women architects who might want to participate. In 1995 the Frauenburo invited eight women to submit their estate layouts together with interior plans⁹. An all women jury of experts in planning, building and design was appointed to select the winning entry, which came from the architect, Franziska Ullman. Her design convinced the jury through its variety of units, its sensitive solutions for open space design and its integration of feminist criteria into the design of the development¹⁰.

The principles of the design

The brief identified a number of principles which were to be incorporated into the design and, although they were based on women's expressed views on everyday life, it could be argued that the principles guiding the development also help to improve the quality of men's and children's lives.

The essence of life is change: Space Flexibility

- Flats will be designed to be practical and take particular account of the requirements of families.
- Flats will be appropriate for different phases of life and should allow space to be used flexibly while offering rooms of equal quality.

Commonly space within a dwelling is portioned in a social and spatial hierarchy that can be seen most clearly in the apportioning of space between bedrooms^{11 12}. The master (sic) bedroom is relatively large while subsidiary bedrooms that are expected

to be occupied by children are smaller in spite of the heightened status of children in the household such that each child usually merits a room of his/her own¹³. This creates problems for households when children acquire TVs, videos and computers as well as the traditional toy box paraphernalia.

The need for flexibility is also seen in principles relating to external areas:

- A principle of 'fit for everyday life' will infuse the development of social spaces and outdoor spaces that can generally be used for multiple purposes.
- There should be numerous free spaces that should be generally accessible. The various needs of the old and young, men and women should be taken into account by the variety of spaces available.

Implicit here is the concept of a balanced community which meets the needs of all generations while ensuring that design does not create disability or exclusion through environmental barriers¹⁴.

Opportunities for inter-action

While building a community is seen as desirable for the most part in residential developments, a higher value is placed by architects on "protecting individual privacy rather than creating opportunities for meeting other residents"¹⁵. In the Frauen-werk-stadt the need for networking is encouraged by design.

- Spaces for encounters support the development of neighbourly relations. Stairwells and entrance areas are generous and invite people to take a break. Apart from their basic function, the staircases should be usable as pleasant places where tenants can spend time and communicate with each other.
- "Social space" is created. On average, there are only four units per storey. This is to avoid anonymity and to enhance neighbourly relations.

Kirsten Simonsen¹⁶ talks of the importance of social interaction between neighbours: the people you say "hello" to on the street. While these ties are seen as weak in relation to the strong bonds of family and friends they are not unimportant¹⁷. For women, these casual encounters create an engagement with a wider circle and through these there are possibilities of exchanges of goods and support services¹⁸. Hanson and Pratt's work¹⁹ reveals women using these networks to find employment. The existence of a widespread network of weak ties also serves to make a neighbourhood feel like a safe and friendly "private world"^{20 21}.

Connecting dwellings

- Links are established between the interior and exterior of the building: between the flat, the staircase, covered walkway and the garden-type courtyards, squares, residential and play streets.

As in other northern European countries, a covered circulation or communal space to link dwellings makes sense in the Austrian climate and provides a point of social contact between neighbours, whatever the weather²².

Neighbourhood services

- The project should include a doctor's surgery, 1,000 square meters or so of shop space to meet the everyday requirements of families; a training centre for women returnees; a communication centre and a local police station.

In the name "Frauen-Werk-Stadt" there is an embedded relationship between women, paid work, care and home responsibilities and the microenvironment. This commitment can be seen in the principle of meeting everyday life needs through easy-to-reach, neighbourhood-based collective responses to individual problems. These desires don't only find articulation in Europe; in the United States there is a small but significant movement called New Urbanism which is based on the Ahwanee Principles of mixing home, job opportunities and daily needs within walking distance²³.

The importance of play

- Spaces for playing are available in adequate sizes and densities.
- Children can safely play outside.

While residential development is frequently geared to child rearing households, the provision for children's play is often treated in a minimal fashion. The concern for children's needs underlines the holistic vision of women who see themselves as embedded in a network of care and responsibilities for others.

Paying attention to safety

- The housing development is safe. Distances are short and routes are open to everyone's view, as are entrances and stairwells. Careful planning of garages prevents the creation of fear generators.
- Staircases are transparent and well lighted to avoid danger zones inspiring anxiety and fear in women.

Women to a large extent manage their fear by avoidance and this may be realistic in relation to avoiding particular walking routes or public spaces or to a lesser extent unsafe public transport. However, given women's frequently unequal access to housing²⁴, many have less choice about where they may live. Design that is sensitive to fear of crime is therefore paramount when considering new housing development. There is a large literature on the extent to which poor design creates opportunities for crime and anti-social behaviour and the possible converse that thoughtful design may prevent such incidents^{25 26}. Werkele and Whitzman²⁷ suggest that security-conscious design is only part of the answer with valuable inputs also being made by attention to process issues such as resident involvement²⁸. It is possible that the combination of good design in the Frauen-Werk-Stadt arising from in-depth involvement of women (although not of the actual residents) creates a greater sense of safety than either element alone.

Making use of Incidental spaces

- The housing development is practical. Pram and bike storerooms and community laundry rooms are big enough and within convenient reach on the ground floor and easily accessible.

- There is a ring-type garage situated below the apartment buildings with each staircase having its own access. There is at least the possibility that unoccupied garage lots can be later used as rooms for leisure activities.

Incidental space is usually either forgotten in the sense of omitted or poorly designed leading to compromises in personal safety. The omission of these spaces leads to storage problems within the home. Here family storage is integrated into the development together with spaces that are capable of being put to use as hobby rooms or workshops.

The hub of the home?

- Special attention is given to the kitchens as central places of housework. They are all large, provided with sufficient daylight and face the courtyards, "common" or play street.

While this has been acknowledged as good practice since the 1960s²⁹ feminist critiques nearly forty years later are still asking why many kitchens have no windows; why street layouts rarely allow a view of a play area and why so few developments have integrated play facilities³⁰.

Neighbourhood facilities

A kindergarten was created and is located within the housing development to service neighbourhood need. This has been a great success not only as a children's facility but also because it has acted as a meeting point for mothers who have formed friendships and support networks. Many households have consciously chosen to relocate to the Frauen-Werk-Stadt to have access to this facility such that demand for places now exceeds supply. The provision of the kindergarten is important when considered in the context of little childcare provision for children under three years old in Austria³¹. It is only in recent times that this lack of kindergarten provision for under threes has been identified as a constraint on women's choices in returning to work. The project hoped to tackle this problem from both sides by alleviating concerns over quality childcare within walking distance and by creating training facilities. Unfortunately the training centre never came off the drawing board because of inflexible planning regulations and funding difficulties. The neighbourhood shops also failed to materialise though across the street a more recent model project (the Compact City) has a supermarket integrated within its curtilage.

While gender-sensitive housing design of the dwellings was achieved, much that would have re-integrated everyday life needs at the neighbourhood level has been stifled. The project exposes much of the tensions at the time: women grasping opportunities to capture the foreground in thinking about neighbourhood and using inclusive methods to broaden the stakeholder group but finding limited success in actualising women's holistic visions. However, the achievements of the Frauen-Werk-Stadt were considerable within Vienna and the project delivered a tangible symbol of women-sensitive planning. It began with grassroots women expressing their perceptions of their environment and resulted in the ideas being incorporated into the design for a housing project. It provided a testing ground for ideas and has acted as a template for future developments. The development of the Frauen-Werk-Stadt has raised awareness of women-sensitive planning at all levels from grassroots women to

city administrators, politicians, architects and builders³². It is now common practice to view interior plans alongside the overall site layout to ensure a holistic environment. A concern for women's everyday life as a touchstone for high quality design has now been accepted as good practice and is routinely used in architectural competitions run by the City of Vienna. Though the equality agenda has moved on from a focus on women to a concern for gender sensitivity³³, it is recognised that “meeting women's needs can help create an environment that works better for everyone in society”³⁴. Thus the Frauen-Werk-Stadt has become the benchmark against which other developments are regularly judged. It is fitting perhaps that it was then renamed the Margarethe Schutte-Lihotzky Hof to honour the one hundredth birthday of one of Austria's most important architectural theorists.

The institutional learning goes beyond a focus on new outputs. The organisational culture in planning and development process has become less male dominated such that more women are regularly short-listed for architectural competitions. In what is still a male dominated society, the Frauen-Werk-Stadt has challenged both product and process, building new confidences and political strength.

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