

When Women's Lives Transform the City: Care and the Shared Governance of Commons in Turin

Daniela Ciaffi¹

Fernanda Ramalho²

Abstract: Over the past decade, Italy has been experiencing a genuine silent revolution, in which many residents have been putting into practice new ways of both owning and managing the commons. To date, more than 350 municipalities have adopted the “Regulation for the Shared Administration of the Commons,” which makes it possible to establish “Collaboration Pacts” for the care of spaces and services open to everyone. Through this instrument, local communities mobilize by signing these pacts, thereby forming alliances with local public administrators for the co-management of both material and immaterial commons. Two basic rules govern these agreements: first, public officials must act not as authorities but as equals; second, the agreement must always remain open to anyone wishing to join and contribute. Approximately 8,000 pacts are currently active throughout the country, each embodying the principle of horizontal subsidiarity introduced into the Italian Constitution in 2001, according to which public institutions must support the autonomous initiatives of citizens carrying out activities in the public interest. The most recent report by the Laboratory for Subsidiarity, whose vice president is one of the authors of this article, analyzes the gender dimension of these pacts for the first time in order to understand whether they are used equally by men and women. Data from 2023 reveal a clear predominance of male participation. Only 30% of the pacts were signed exclusively by women or by groups composed predominantly of women. A female majority appears only in the relatively rare pacts involving more than ten signatories. Male active citizens, by contrast, are more prevalent in smaller pacts with simpler governance structures, which constitute the vast majority of cases. Alongside this quantitative monitoring, qualitative analyses of these processes have also been advancing through studies and research projects, including the one at the center of this article, which focuses on the life stories of three women active in Turin over the last decade. Drawing on excerpts from life-history interviews collected through the architecture thesis of the article's co-author, the study seeks to give voice to three female biographies shaped by the everyday care of three emblematic spaces of shared governance in one of Italy's largest metropolitan cities. These spaces include a

¹ Associate Professor of Architecture at the Politecnico di Torino, Italy. Holds a PhD in Territorial Planning and Local Development from the Politecnico di Torino. ORCID: 0009-0009-5712-5393. Email: daniela.ciaffi@polito.it.

² Researcher at the Politecnico di Torino. Holds an MA in Architecture from the Politecnico di Torino. ORCID: 0009-0001-3370-4851. Email: fernanda.desouza@polito.it.

Collaboration Pact initiative, a community concierge center (which also activated a Collaboration Pact), and a neighborhood house, where the primary rule is the non-exclusive use of shared spaces, as in all Collaboration Pacts. To tell these stories, Daniela Ciaffi and Fernanda Ramalho focus on the experiences of Emanuela Saporito, Erika Mattarella, and Camilla Munno.

Keywords: Shared governance; Commons; Life histories; Urban regeneration; Turin; Italy.

On the Shoulders of Three Women: Experiences of Urban Regeneration in Turin

Given the growing frequency with which certain local commons - as they would be called in France (Coriat, Loizeau, and Alix 2024) - in the city of Turin are being visited and studied by non-Turinese, it would seem that more and more people in Europe and around the world are interested in visiting places emblematic of theories on the care of commons and the struggle for their existence, such as those at the center of this paper. As sociologists, we might say that these are the populations of social innovators, European planners, commoners, public administrators, social artists, and students and faculty from universities, doctoral programs, master's programs, and so on. Those who frequent these ecosystems know that there are prototypical reference areas, open spaces rather than buildings, that over time become symbols of possible social and spatial change at the local level, but also at the national, international, and even global levels. Will local democracy save democracy? (Ciaffi 2023). This seems to us to be the direction in which to push action research, and we hope that those who read this paper will be inspired to visit participatory Turin as well. Anyone interested in understanding how this city is taking care of itself is typically directed or accompanied in Turin to Neighborhood Houses, collaboration pacts, and Community Concierges. The classic narrative is that these places have been transformed spatially and socially thanks to cycles of public urban regeneration policies: European policies such as the *Urban* program of the late 1990s or the *UIA* of the 2010s, mayoral administrations including that of Mayor Sergio Chiamparino, and so on. However, for about a quarter of a century, people's lives have remained hidden in this narrative. Instead, these are processes in which lives matter. Those of the women featured here are an example.

Therefore, we believe it is essential to supplement the many writings on Turin's urban regeneration with three life stories, which in the field of sociology represent, so to speak, the pinnacle of qualitative research. From a presentation standpoint, we have chosen to include frequent direct quotes in order to preserve as much as possible the unique freshness of their voices. As mentioned above, this idea stems from Fernanda Ramalho's master's thesis, supervised by Daniela Ciaffi. It all began with the researcher's personal interest in the impact of women on the construction of the city and society, as we experience it in our daily lives.

At the heart of this work, we have placed some participatory experiences and community-building processes dedicated to the care of the commons, within the urban context of Turin over the past few decades.

Emanuela: "Among the associations that signed the Pact, 80% of the presidents are men, except for Orti Alti, where we are all women on the board. The operators, however, - the staff of the community hub and the operators of the more active associations - are predominantly female."

Getting to know these realities up close led us to question the remarkable female presence in the management of three spaces regenerated in Turin over the past fifteen years. We chose to focus on women who welcome others, thanks to their role as co-managers of spaces and services. It was first a curious and participant observation (Semi and Bolzoni, 2022) that defined the central theme of this study, which seeks to investigate the relationship between women's participation in public life and the nature of the built environments shaped in part by them. In this introductory phase, it is important to emphasize that the intention is to analyze the female contribution within the international debate on so-called contributory democracy (Yannik 2016), within a collaborative framework entirely uninterested in competing hypotheses and theses between women and men working in the field of urban regeneration.

Nor is the objective to offer an analysis aimed at replicating techniques and tools useful in other projects, but rather to recognize and describe the presence of adult women citizens active in promoting more inclusive spaces capable of meeting the needs of various segments of the local population through the co-management of urban commons. The biographical approach can certainly enrich an ongoing original debate on the relationship between care and administration, in agreement with those who assert that "feminist criticism of the patriarchal framework of justice and equality

deeply enlightens the failures of public administration. Italian public administration is disliked by citizens, who see it as ineffective; it is disliked by politicians, who subject it to unceasing attempts at reform; it is disliked by Europe, which considers it inadequate for recovery. And it is always feminist thought on the function of caring for people and the world that makes it possible to imagine a different and better administration” (Pioggia 2024:3). In a way we believe is consistent with this approach, we begin with a few lines about ourselves, the women authors of this text.

Fernanda

This article originates from my master’s thesis, in which I sought to give new meaning to everything I had studied during my years in the architecture program at a polytechnic university. I was looking for a way to redesign the technical role of the architect and architecture in a different, strongly political and social way. To this end, it seemed appropriate and interesting to give space to the curiosity I have always had in my life toward female figures. I was born and raised in northeastern Brazil, in a family deeply rooted in the affection, strength, hospitality, and actions of extraordinary women, who have always inspired respect in me. Living in the Brazilian urban context, in an environment of extreme inequality, has allowed me to closely observe the impact of women’s activism in building networks, at the domestic level and beyond, which have always seemed essential for survival itself in a context of severe resource scarcity. These are the roots of this work, which I developed together with Professor Daniela. A project that aims to tell the stories of some of the many women behind the numbers and the success of various projects that seek to gradually regenerate different urban spaces.

Daniela

“Fernanda wrote her thesis with me”: that’s how it is said. I’ll take a few lines to describe how I experienced that “with me” in this case.

I take a step back in my memory and recall that I was crossing the street in front of the exit from Bologna station. I was chatting with Alfredo, the professor of urban sociology “with whom I was writing my doctoral thesis.” Stopped at a red light, the

conversation suddenly turned to the gender approach, and I told him that I didn't find it all that interesting. Before we had crossed the crosswalk, he made me understand that, on the contrary, the problem was real: it was the early 2000s, and the data spoke clearly, as did the qualitative analyses. I've thought back on that moment many times, searching for justifications for my naivety in my life experience, having always been surrounded by prominent female figures in my family, starting with my grandmother and my mother, and throughout my educational journey, which was filled with schoolteachers and dance instructors, principals, professors, and department heads, most of whom were women.

Years later, I came to understand more about the social ecosystem of Turin, where I was born and raised, by reading "Il sorpasso", a beautiful study on the social trajectories of women in the second generation of Southern Italians in Turin: in the factory city, where most women stayed home to care for the family, many studied and worked in offices, achieving emancipation more quickly than their brothers stuck on the assembly lines. We're talking about that very same Fiat where Ivar Oddone was a scholar in action, helping to foster in Italy not only occupational medicine but also that participatory sociology so dear to me.

When Fernanda told me about her plan to write a thesis on the management of public assets in Turin, I was still reeling from a bad experience: Marta's thesis, a work on the troubling gender gap among architects, based on data she collected in three Italian provinces, not only failed to impress the graduation committee but was also humiliated with an extremely low grade. I remain her proud advisor, but for Marta, as for me, the anger is great, and so is the pain. I told Fernanda about this, but she didn't get scared; on the contrary, I almost got the impression that she was even more convinced of the challenge. So I took the initiative and shared with her a thought I had been nurturing for a long time, but which I've only recently been able to bring into focus thanks to writings by friends and colleagues like Alessandra Valastro and Elena Granata. The growing general attention to the topic is evident, and this, too, naturally inspires me.

What I think is that in Turin, the narrative of urban regeneration, from the late 1990s to the present, has revolved around policies framed in partisan terms, particularly those of the Democratic Party: the Special Suburbs Project during the mayoralty of Valentino Castellani (1993–2001), which was continued by Sergio

Chiamparino (2001–2011), first with a strong emphasis on participation and later on strategic communication. The baton then passed to Piero Fassino (2011–2016), and it was Ilda Curti, the memorable councilor for urban regeneration, who secured the approval of the Regulation for the Shared Administration of the Urban Commons as the final administrative act before the electoral upset by the Five Star Movement under Mayor Chiara Appendino (2016–2021), marking a partisan shift that lasted only a single electoral cycle. Stefano Lo Russo is currently serving as mayor, once again from the Democratic Party, of both Turin and the Metropolitan City, while urban regeneration remains a recurring theme in election campaigns.

But residents are increasingly abstaining: in 2024, half the city stays away from the polls (July 2024). And here we come to a question that I believe is central: how can a political-partisan narrative hold up when, behind a representative democracy in crisis, a new politics is emerging: one in which the new subject is the society of care; the new object is the commons; the new method is shared governance; money is no longer the overriding priority; the gallery of suburbs regaining centrality while simultaneously risking gentrification is growing ever larger; traditionally excluded people prove to be unique resources; the public/private dichotomy is bridged by a third, common path; there is a growing enthusiasm for rethinking the rules governing the use of spaces and services (this point is a veritable mantra in the literature on the Commons); above all, thanks to new, egalitarian, and collaborative behaviors, are more and more residents able to imagine new geometries of power that are less and less vertical and more and more horizontal? (Ciaffi 2021)

The thesis we support here, which also encompasses Fernanda's thesis, is that the narrative of political changes and the polis must also be renewed. Without claiming to know how, we assert here that "women's lives matter" as we seek to understand certain regenerative changes in Turin and other cities around the world. In short, our hypothesis is that the political lives of certain women active in the care of the commons matter far more than they have so far in the narrative of urban regeneration. The relevant literature is substantial, and below we present a summary of some key passages.

Life Stories and Qualitative Research Methodology

The fragments of the interviews presented here are based on a qualitative research study conducted in two phases.

In the first phase, the research was carried out through participant observation. Therefore, Fernanda spent several days in these spaces, establishing an observation schedule divided into five sessions as follows: 2 morning sessions (10:00 AM – 12:00 PM); 2 afternoon sessions (3:00 PM – 5:00 PM); 1 evening session (7:00 PM – 9:00 PM). During these sessions, the level of her participation varied. In addition to notes, visual research through photography was also employed during participant observation.

After completing the first phase, the research moved on to the second phase, focused on conducting interviews with senior female figures involved in the management of the spaces under analysis. These interviews were divided into two parts. The first and main part, on which this article focuses, was based on the life story methodology, in which the interviewee tells her own story with minimal interference from the interviewer, in line with the study's approach. This method seeks to explore the relationship between women's life experiences and the impact of those experiences on the construction of the spaces analyzed and no specific questions were prepared for this type of interview - as happen in semi-structured or structured approaches. Given the leadership roles they hold within their respective initiatives, the interviewees are very used to giving interviews. Indeed, one could say that the success of their ongoing projects means they are stressed by the constant requests for information, presentations, and site visits. The difficulties in conducting these particular life story interviews were therefore not only in securing their availability but also, and above all, in making them understand that the focus was different from the usual. It was not easy to guide the respondents toward the biographical approach and keep them engaged with it. Although the three women interviewed have long been friends and colleagues of the supervising professor (Daniela), the relationship of trust with the thesis student (Fernanda) was certainly not deep, quite the opposite. It is not easy to tell one's life to someone one barely knows. Despite this barrier, this approach made it possible to gather information that would be difficult to obtain through a more traditional structured interview. Some of the recurring biographical themes were: the different stages of life, the experience of motherhood, experiences of cooperation, professional experiences, and lived spaces.

The second part of the interview consisted of a brief semi-structured outline used to clarify aspects previously observed in the spaces of interest, helping Fernanda better understand the hypotheses formulated. In both parts, a certain flexibility ensured that both the interviewee and the interviewer had the freedom necessary to explore themes emerging during the dialogue, without losing sight of the predefined points of focus.

From spaces to the lives of three women who co-manage commons

Emanuela, Erika, and Camilla, the three women selected, have for years repeatedly met with groups of people interested in understanding how Turin is regenerating itself in different local contexts: visitors arrive from other Italian and foreign cities because they want to understand local participatory policies. They explain these policies to them and take them to visit places that are changing thanks to active communities. However, the visitors are almost never interested in the women's lives.

Emanuela and the Beeozanam Community Hub

The Beeozanam Community Hub is located at Via Foligno 14, on the northern periphery of Turin, between the neighborhoods of Madonna di Campagna and Borgo Vittoria. Described on the website as a pluralistic space where ideas and communities are fostered, Beeozanam was created through the renovation of a major industrial complex. An example of futurist architecture by architect Nicolaj Diulgheroff, it was built in the 1940s to house the Simbi Factory, remaining a location that is as peripheral as it is unique.

The project is managed by a group of very diverse and often conflicting associations and organizations, each engaged in urban regeneration in various ways, with objectives ranging from environmental sustainability to youth engagement, from education to multiculturalism, and from urban art to social catering. Together with the residents and those who frequent the hub, these various entities have been committed for a few years to a pact aimed at promoting a community space that is always open to everyone, but also a place that offers various activities to citizens to fight unemployment and social marginalization: professional training and job placement;

workshops to prevent school dropout; and artistic activities for cultural production are examples that align closely with the more traditional concept of public service. The rooftop garden as a relational tool functions in a way that is much closer to the commons which is cared for collectively with approaches quite different from those of public services.

Among the actors involved in managing this project is Emanuela: architect, mother, and researcher. She is a co-founder of OrtiAlti, one of the associations that signed the collaboration agreement establishing the Community Hub. A graduate in architecture from a polytechnic university, Emanuela has always sought to rediscover and highlight the political aspect of her practice.

"I graduated in architecture in 2008, and even while working on my thesis, I focused on participatory processes. I enrolled in architecture thinking I would be attending an artistic, humanistic faculty, somewhere between technical and artistic skills. I honestly had no idea what I would find: I was actually enrolling in a polytechnic school. I wasn't at all aware of disciplines like urban planning or the more humanistic approach to architecture, which is more linked to sociology. So, it was all a discovery, a fundamental one, because it brought me back to the essence of what I was studying. It gave me back that sense that is deeply rooted in my family background."

Emanuela's practice, and thus also the work she develops with Beeozanam, is deeply linked to the political and social impact of the architect's role. A political activism that comes from her family background and that gives her daily work a meaning as deeply rooted in her context of origin as it is distinct from it, for example, in terms of an action culture that is non-religious and non-Catholic.

"I was born into a family where political activism has always been very strong. My mother was and still is a practicing Catholic from the Catholic Action movement, which is the more left-leaning Catholic sector in Italy, where social Catholicism is practiced and preached, oriented toward activism for social justice. My father comes from a communist family, all members were in the Communist Party, and he has always been politically active. Not in a very radical way, but more institutionally. In my home, we discussed and debated social justice and politics, in the sense of active participation in the political life of our country and our cities, every day. So for me, that's a fundamental part of my identity, something I cultivated at home and also sought outside of it."

"I also cultivated it in high school. I attended a high school on the periphery of Turin, a very militant one, and although I wasn't truly part of the occupying groups and didn't often visit the occupied spaces, I always projected a political function or meaning into my private life. I'm more and more convinced that the personal is political. By the way, Erika Mattarella, whom you interviewed, went to the same high school as me."

Erika and the Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè

The Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè, the Barriera di Milano Neighborhood House, is located at number 9 and currently occupies the historic building of the public baths dedicated to the neighborhood. In this space, a "socio-cultural center" is combined with a shower facility available to people, normally in fragile situations, who need to shower for personal hygiene. The local community is engaged in building interpersonal relationships within a context rich in cultural diversity, representing a contemporary urban reality that is diverse and inclusive. Its primary service has always been public baths, but over the years this has been complemented by a reception desk for non-Italian residents and support for citizens in job searches, information on public health services, assistance with various bureaucratic procedures, and so on. Furthermore, the House aims to foster social interaction and culture, constantly involving the community in the creation of the space and its activities. From jazz concerts to the breastfeeding station, all the services and activities that are or have been part of the House come from the commitment and initiatives of various local communities, ethnic groups as well as seniors, children, and women.

This is where Erika comes in: activist, mother, and neighborhood resident. She is the director of the Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè. In her own words, her entry into the world of social cooperation was accidental.

"I studied communication sciences and worked at an advertising agency, where I didn't feel comfortable because it's a very ambitious, very male-dominated environment. So I quit and took a year off from my life and started doing activities with an association in Falchera [...]"

Her life intersected with that of the Bagni Pubblici right from the start of the project in 2008.

"The then councilor, Ilda Curti, the first to start talking about commons (in Turin), suggested to my (association) president that I should be in charge of opening the Bagni Pubblici in Barriera. Because I was young and would have the energy to do such a crazy thing, and also because I lived in the neighborhood, maybe I knew the people. So I got this phone call, and I answered, 'What are you talking about?' I had finally reached a wonderful point in my life in Falchera (At that time, Erika was working for an association in the Falchera neighborhood on the periphery of Turin). I had spent 5 years struggling, 'bleeding' to earn respect because I was a girl, I was a woman, and I wasn't from the neighborhood. And so I had reached a point where I was Erika, you know? I don't know how to explain it."

In Falchera, Erika had her first experiences in the world of social work, also serving on the neighborhood citizens' committee through the Civil Service program with the City of Turin.

"I worked for almost 10 years in Falchera. Those were 10 incredibly formative years. Because I learned to connect deeply with the citizens, even with the most vulnerable people. We had an office where we provided support services to residents and managed various projects. There were many illiterate people who came to have their bills read to them. There, I learned to engage with politics. Rodolfo Grasso (President of the Falchera Development Committee) really trained me; he used to tell me, 'We have to go to City Council meetings, sit in the back, wait for them to finish, and then talk to them'. A truly strategic approach. [...] There, I learned that, one way or another, you always need to be informed about what's going on. This really stuck with me, so here, everyone always makes fun of me, even the people from the neighborhood: 'Mattarella, you always know everything!' Because in reality, I still go to listen to the city council meetings."

The involvement of various stakeholders and collaboration among them represent the most valuable and important aspect for Erika. In her words, the differences that exist in this scenario, when considered and embraced, offer what she calls "a well-equipped kitchen."

"[...] During this time, I met so many people. People in different roles. Citizens, politicians, and officials. They really allowed me to get to know, understand, interact with, and try to change a lot of things that I wouldn't have been able to do otherwise. Understanding as much as possible how right and necessary, even though difficult, it is

to involve citizens. And how right and difficult, yet necessary, it is to understand how the municipal machinery works and bring these two worlds together. It has always been the process I enjoy the most."

Camilla and the Borgo San Paolo Community Concierge

In the western part of Turin, the Borgo San Paolo Community Concierge is located at 19/A Parco Braccini, occupying and repurposing a former bowling club. It is a space surrounded by greenery that aims to engage the local community through cultural and social initiatives, enriching and energizing itself at the same time thanks to the community participation. As in the community concierge model, the space offers numerous local services, both on-site and itinerant, dedicated to residents. The skills of people who come into contact with the concierge are gathered on a platform called the "knowledge portal," which is extremely useful for matching supply with demand, not only among residents but also between residents and public employment services at the city, provincial, and regional levels. Activities are co-designed with residents through periodic participatory meetings, with the aim of listening to the community's needs and desires to create and develop cultural and social activities. These initiatives take place not only within the Portineria's spaces but are also distributed throughout the surrounding area.

Camilla is the director of the National Network of Concierges. Trained as an urban planner, she has always had a clear interest in the political and collaborative aspects of urban planning and, more generally, public policy. This inclination led her to seek a concrete application of her work, such as the one she is currently developing within the *Rete Italiana di Cultura Popolare* through the concierge model.

"I've always had this strong interest in public and urban policies, in local development and the stories of communities, in working in networks within the territory. At this point in my life, working at the Rete Italiana, I feel represented. It fulfills me because it has answered the questions I was seeking, questions that once seemed unachievable when I was studying urban planning.[...]. You move around a bit, do some volunteering in associations, then you discover a place that does something that makes you feel that way, but then it's not really a job, so you don't quite understand what you're doing. I went to France, came back, and discovered that there were

organizations that do exactly this: take care of communities like the Rete Italiana di Cutura Popolare does."

Before joining the Concierge, Camilla had gained experience that always revolved around the search for a "collective social relationship with people." Paths that, in a sense, led her to develop and now offer the activities of the community concierges.

"During my university years, I was part of an association focused on environmental sustainability, which was a topic close to my heart at the time. [...] So, that's where I started getting to know various associative worlds. [...] But before arriving here, from the end of university to today, I've had many experiences. One of the first was a job I did in Haiti [...] at an engineering firm that was building a hospital. It was a dermatology hospital for people in need who couldn't afford treatment. So, from a social and humanitarian perspective, I obviously seized the opportunity. That's when I began to have thoughts I hadn't really considered before, about being active in the community for and with others."

The work carried out in the concierges is strongly focused on people and on building networks. This has always been a fundamental aspect for Camilla, even when she wasn't yet entirely sure how she would shape her career as an urban planner.

"[In the association] I had already noticed, actually, the importance of building social relationships in the community, getting to know the place, understanding what it does, and connecting with people. It was something relational. Let's say that relationships are something I really enjoy developing. [...] I actually have two character traits: one where I withdraw a lot at certain times, and another where I really enjoy sharing, being in a group, and being there for others. I wouldn't say it's exactly to help. Not exactly in the pure volunteering sense, as it's usually imagined, but making myself available for something useful to people who maybe can't do it or have more difficulties. So that's something, a feeling I've always had."

Care and the Urban Space

In what democratic framework can these three stories of political lives, and many others besides, be situated? Discussing the polis, Plato argued that teaching people to care for themselves was equivalent to teaching them to care for the polis, by

taking responsibility for the city's social and political life (Gamelli 2001). Certainly, for Plato, the definition of the terms polis and care was quite distinct from what we attribute to those words today. In the Greek polis, moreover, women and slaves were strictly excluded. But certainly, from the interviews with Camilla, Erika, and Emanuela, a certain form of care toward certain parts of themselves emerges, which extends to caring for the communities and places to which they dedicate themselves daily.

The idea of the polis has undergone radical transformations, becoming more inclusive and complex, while the concept of care has expanded to encompass various disciplines, particularly with the rise of feminist studies in the 1970s.

However, the passage of centuries has essentially distanced us from this conception of care directed toward urban spaces, as presented in Plato's reasoning. At a certain point in our cultural past, experiences related to care, social relations, productivity, and so on were fragmented, divided into two distinct spheres. Spheres that follow a specific model of development and define separate roles, modes, and spaces (Marinelli 2009:30).

This separation, as Bassanini (2018) explains, stems spatially from the creation of the "space of the self", a private space disconnected from the polis and from social interactions with the outside world, which is clearly defined in the nineteenth-century bourgeois home. This is a "showcase home" with numerous furnishings and spaces with established functions, quite different from pre-nineteenth-century homes, where spaces were open and undefined, without a clear distinction between the domestic sphere and that of the polis.

This division excludes the care of urban spaces, placing it within the domestic, private, and emotional sphere, governed by the "natural" and by emotion. Thus, the city establishes itself as the space of techniques, of the public sphere of rights and the market. In this sense, one might imagine that care is not only excluded from the urban context but also opposed to the idea of the contemporary, capitalist city. Separating care and the city, keeping the former within the domestic context, nullifies any possibility of building solid relationships in the public space. Care requires relating to others; there is no care without relationships. Marinelli (2015) defines it as "the highest qualitative expression of the relationship." It demands attention to the body, to emotions, to space, to the immaterial. All these aspects are not well regarded in a

context defined by profit, consumption, the material, and, therefore, the liquidity of relationships.

Nonetheless, cities continue to be built by bodies that are vulnerable and dependent at every stage of life. Thus, confining care to the domestic sphere ignores this vulnerability and prevents the formation of strong bonds between the city and its citizens, nullifying the relationship of care between one another. Care is the work that sustains and defends this vulnerability of bodies. To ignore its necessity is to ignore the existence of a vulnerable subject (Pulcini 2010:3) and to align with the notion of a sovereign subject: a self-sufficient citizen who, in the urban context, accesses care only sporadically and exceptionally through healthcare facilities, daycare centers, senior centers, and so on. Outside these exceptional services in the urban context, public space remains designed and conceived for the “typical citizen”, the sovereign subject who complies with the city's governing rules. It presents itself as a space hostile to anyone exhibiting any form of vulnerability.

Breaking with the exclusion of the care model from the city and making it an integral part of it confronts us with the reality that views vulnerability not as a deviation, but as an intrinsic condition of every individual. At some point in their existence, probably at multiple points, the citizen will experience a decline in their autonomy. The certainty of the fragility of childhood and old age is in itself a demonstration of the need for a non-indifferent approach to care (Marinelli 2009:33).

When this vulnerability becomes apparent, the city without care reveals itself to be exclusionary and incapable of accommodating not only non-typical bodies, but also any individual engaged in the act of caring for others, still largely women. A classic example of this is public transportation options and their routes, which demonstrate a complete disconnection from “care mobility” (Sánchez de Madariaga 2013), a term coined to define trips made to meet the needs of the domestic context and caregiving responsibilities. A non-linear route, characterized by zigzags, aimed at activities such as accompanying others, as children and the elderly. These activities are linked to daily, unpaid care work that is usually not considered an integral part of the city's regulatory system, which views the “typical user” as part of its productive organization, meaning the typical adult man, healthy, educated, and a paid worker who moves in a linear and standardized manner from point A to point B (Kern 2015).

Although widely studied, this zigzagging “care route” is not the only example that shapes the image of this city. The city without care is also the image of a person pushing a stroller on unadapted sidewalks. It can also be the image of an elderly person with limited mobility trying to cross the street as quickly as possible to keep up with the fast-changing traffic light cycle. In this urban context, designed to be exclusionary and therefore “neutral and harmonious” for a single type of user, where care is absent, any non-typical body becomes an anomaly, an accident.

On the other hand, those spaces that we might even call feminist, or rather, transfeminist, are made up of conflicts, alliances, self-determination; of contingent, provisional, and “ephemeral” practices that have explosive effects on lives the moment they disrupt the dichotomies that organize and constrain them. Passionate, desiring, unpacified spaces, where the subject is not singular, not universal, not neutral. Spaces in which the connection between bodies, politics, and the city reveals itself not only as a critical nexus of structural violence, oppression, and exclusion, but also as a promise: of alliances, of practices of freedom, and self-determination. (Castelli, Olcuire, and Rosenkranz 2018)

These experiences, lived as commonplace and standardized, establish a normality that miseducates the various subjects of the urban environment, generating not only growing hostility toward vulnerable citizens and those who provide care, but also toward the city itself and the ecosystem in which they are embedded. In the general context of urban environments, care is an exception. An exception that would be found freely only in the domestic context, which would limit the feeling of empathy to that private space, whether it be the primary one or any other type of “domesticated” space understood as an extension of one’s home. In this way, care, understood as the ability to relate to space as well, would have a limited scope, defining any area beyond that sphere as a foreign, neutral environment, unworthy of responsibility or attention. In the city without care, this context of a total absence of connection with the ecosystem reveals a management of resources, both natural and artificial, that ignores all limits.

Caring for Cities and Spaces

In discussing care within architecture and urban design, Tronto (2019) draws attention to a perspective slightly different from the one discussed previously, pointing

out that perhaps our cities and their spaces are not entirely foreign to the topic. According to her, architects and urban planners are not entirely uncaring. In fact, they do care, but in the wrong way: they are concerned with the wrong things. This is because, to truly reintegrate care into the urban context, it is necessary to understand the term in relation to the vulnerability of bodies and the ecosystem.

In this way, it is possible to conceive care as a paradigm for urban governance, as Marinelli (2009) further argues. This proposal is not limited to focusing on institutional care spaces such as hospitals, nursing homes, and daycare centers; rather, it proposes a paradigm in which the construction of a city of care goes hand in hand with the development of a society of care. The valued everyday experience is thus much more connected to the ephemeral and less to the material. An effective system of governance can only exist within an environment of the highest complexity, given its difficult management, emotional involvement, and the individual construction of the meaning of existence.

To illustrate the idea of this governance of care, Marinelli acknowledges that her life matters and reflects on her personal experience in Stockholm as the mother of a newborn between 2004 and 2005. At that time, the city seemed to have made great strides in the perspective of care within the urban space. Wider access to subway doors for wheelchairs, strollers, and luggage; access to buses with open strollers; a continuous network of pedestrian paths throughout the city surrounded by greenery and free of architectural barriers. In other words, an urban space designed for people and their bodies, including vulnerable ones.

This discussion and vision of the city of care as a form of governance and a management model is a line of development that spans a wide variety of fields, including economics, philosophy, and sociology. But, although it is no simple task, some authors seek to integrate care into the urban and architectural context in a “more tangible” way, attempting to highlight a series of best practices or concrete aspects that can guide the actual construction of this new urban space.

As early as 1990, Tronto and Fisher proposed starting from a general understanding of the term “care,” defining it as “a species-specific activity that includes everything we do to maintain, sustain, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in the best possible way.” A clear definition that would evolve, leading the author, through

many discussions, to identify five aspects useful for understanding care practices: caring about, caring for, care giving, care receiving, and caring with (Tronto 2019).

Caring about is the first phase, the one that pays attention to the needs to be addressed, while also considering the conflicts between them. Caring for is the phase that defines acceptance and the assignment of responsibility. In the case of the shared administration of the commons, caring for could be linked to responsibility for the entire process, from co-design, to signing the pact, to the co-management of the commons. Care giving refers to the attention paid to the actual acts of care that must accompany this process, such as ensuring the safety of people using a space that is not exclusively theirs but always open to everyone. Care receiving encompasses what happens once the action or project is “concluded”. This is what we commonly call maintenance. A focus on ongoing care, a process of co-management that repeats daily. Finally, “caring with” emphasizes the reliability of these care-giving actions, valuing the solidarity and trust that are built among the people involved, leading to a deeper connection with the object and a sense of responsibility toward its needs.

Fernanda: "So, how would you define the role of women in the maintenance and development of the commons?"

Erika: "Svitól. Do you know Svitól? Svitól is a spray you use when a bolt is rusted. Like with a bicycle. You need to take the wheel off, but it's a bit tough, so you spray this, and it loosens up."

Within architecture, these practices can be traced in the work of certain female architects, such as Lina Bo Bardi, who combined technique, design culture, and social sensitivity in her approach to architecture.

In the Sesc Pompéia project, which revitalizes a former industrial area in São Paulo, Lina not only oversaw the architectural design but also actively participated in the building's development and daily life. She oversaw the various phases and stages of the cultural center, dedicating herself to organizing the opening celebration, including its menu and decorations, and curated the museum's exhibition program and the complex's maintenance team, insisting that it be composed of those who had participated in the construction (Marinelli 2002). Furthermore, Lina applied a research methodology she defined as “direct,” through which she sought to gain a deep

understanding of the life of the space and the pre-existing architecture, as she recounts in one of her writings regarding a site visit in 1976 (Bassanini 2018).

“The second time I was there, on a Saturday, the atmosphere was completely different: no longer the elegant and solitary Hennebiquean structure, but a cheerful crowd of children, moms, dads, and elderly people moving from one pavilion to another. Some children were running; teenagers were playing soccer in the rain falling from the broken roofs, laughing at the shots that sent the ball into the water. Mothers were preparing skewers and sandwiches at the entrance to Rua Clécia; a small puppet theater was operating nearby, filled with children. I thought: all of this must continue like this, with all this joy. I returned many more times, on Saturdays and Sundays, until I clearly imprinted those joyful scenes of everyday life in my mind. This is where the story of the creation of the Sesc Center - Fábrica da Pompéia begins.”

Lina's methodology, therefore, is one that arises from a relationship of care, an intimate connection with the project from start to finish. A focus on building connections with the space and the bodies that inhabit it, assuming a role of active, almost maternal responsibility toward that space and its vitality. The architectural project incorporates practices of care aimed at creating the conditions for the development of life within that environment and the community that forms within it.

These experiences demonstrate that, even if they come from a discussion that is almost emotional and ephemeral, a city and an architecture of care can indeed develop through an operational practice and ethics based on care itself.

Domestic intelligence in the city of care

A city and an architecture of care can develop through an ethics of action grounded in care, but this requires its reintegration into the public sphere, beyond the realm of emotions. In this process, the female figure, historically the protagonist of the domestic sphere and thus of care, emerges as a potential key element. However, it is important to clarify, first and foremost, that the aim of this section is to discuss the relationship between female figures and the care of the commons, within a vision of co-management alongside other actors, starting with public officials responsible for spaces and services that can evolve into the commons. In this regard, Silvia Federici (2021) emphasizes that collectivizing reproduction and recognizing on women the

important role of producing commons has nothing to do with a naturalistic conception of “femininity.” Rather, it is a refusal to erase the collective experiences, knowledge, and struggles that women have accumulated in the field of reproductive labor (p. 130). Historically confined to the domestic sphere and often entirely dedicated to care, this figure acquires knowledge and develops skills that form the basis for a model of communal action, primarily focused on relationships with others. A know-how that, as Marinelli (2009) rightly notes, excluded from the city, does not receive recognition as actual knowledge, like the sciences or any other knowledge fundamental to the evolution of society (p. 31). It remains a wisdom transmitted among women in domestic daily life, perceived as an innate culture that translates into “feminine thought”.

However, some feminist scholars have turned their attention to this function in recent decades, seeking to understand it as a technique and not merely as a set of ephemeral acts linked to the affective realm. An example of this in Italy is the “Gruppo Vanda” research group, which in the 1990s dedicated itself to studying women’s practices and thought within architecture and cities. It is through these studies that the group coined the term “Model of Domestic Intelligence” to define what is learned through care work carried out in the private sphere, seeking to understand this knowledge as a system worthy of technical value. A know-how that brings with it the tools necessary to tackle complex situations, such as an unexpected event requiring creativity and flexibility, to find immediate solutions using what is available (Faré 2013:90).

Care, situated within the context of domestic intelligence, deals with the ephemeral, with the production of the immaterial, unlike everything that makes up the city. It is a work of gestures, relationships, and words, yet one that simultaneously sustains the lives of bodies. It is also an intelligence that draws on diverse skills, likely comparable to the complex activities of a top executive. It requires the ability to communicate not only verbally, but also through gestures and feelings, and even to teach this language. It requires knowledge of cooking, the use of numerous artisanal tools, and, above all, the ability to manage relationships (Faré 2013:89).

Furthermore, domestic intelligence also involves the ability to navigate the time of care, which is completely different from city life. In care, there is no predictability of a linear logic, and therefore it is urgent to know how to manage the unexpected, using

creativity, improvisation, and careful intuition, valuing the immediate resolution of problems through what the environment offers.

All these abilities, true “soft and hard skills”, lie at the very heart of relationships, in the building of a community with a strong sense of solidarity. It is a realm where rationality and emotion converge to transform into immediate action.

If we combine this framework of domestic intelligence based on concrete actions with the definition of care proposed by Tronto and Fisher (1990), we can see how this feminine know-how, when applied to the urban and architectural context, could bring about a reorientation in the way we conceive of spaces. Moving beyond the idea of architecture and urban planning as a demonstration of power through artistic and technological expression, and turning our attention to the caregiving roles that should be intrinsic to them. Thinking of cities not as a collection of things, but as a network of relationships “with evolving environments, people, flora, and fauna, existing across time and space” (Tronto and Fisher 1990). Abandoning the conception of a city built and designed according to the specific functions and roles of each individual and space, ideal for the capitalist city oriented toward production and profit, and defining, instead, the city of care.

From this perspective, female figures can contribute to urban rethinking not as a recognition of care work or as a predetermined fate for women and female lives, but rather as a recognition of feminine knowledge, built up over the centuries, based on “we” rather than “I.” Applied to the city, such knowledge could reorganize it in a more sustainable and inclusive way.

Conclusions and Next Steps

More than half a century ago, John Lennon sang “Life is what happens to us while we’re busy doing other things” and this provocation still challenges us today on various levels: is private life what happens to us while we’re busy making public policy? Are political lives things that happen to us while we are busy taking care of the commons? We have selected a bibliography on the feminine approach that is so attentive to the differences between private and public spaces as to stimulate many reflections, which certainly remain to be articulated much more clearly in the future, on

spaces used as commons. In this reflection, we have attempted to draw connections between a complex and growing national phenomenon, the shared administration of the commons, and three life paths embodied by three women active in the care of the commons. These two perspectives usually remain separate, while it seems to us that the time has come to begin exercising them together, like the red and blue lenses of 3D glasses, designed to seek depth in the reality that surrounds us. The shared administration of the commons is mostly described as an administrative innovation, a subset of social innovation: the people who practice it are consequently social innovators. But how much politics is there in the lives of those who commit daily to caring for the commons through a collaboration pact, in a neighborhood house, or in a community concierge? How much feminine knowledge is put at the service of complex alliances for urban regeneration that does not immediately fall back into public and private logics, but pushes toward the general interest (Ciaffi 2024)? Focusing on this question, and doing so not only through bibliographic references but also through the collection of biographies, seems to us to point in the direction that “lives matter”, whereas in narratives about urban transformations of recent decades, they have carried little or almost no weight. In short, in the future, action research on participatory and collaborative dynamics oriented in this way could counter dangerous drifts toward depoliticization, precisely by drawing on (auto)biographical meaning.

References

- Bassanini, Gisella. 2018. *Per Amore della Città*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Blanc, Yannik. 2016. "Démocratie contributive: définition et enjeux." *La Tribune fonda* December. Retrieved March 7, 2025 (<https://fonda.asso.fr/tribunes/democratie-contributive-une-renaissance-citoyenne>).
- Castelli Federica, Olcuire Serena e Rosenkranz Giada B.. 2018. *Bruci la città: Generi, transfemminismi e spazio urbano*. Firenze: EDIFIR.
- Ciaffi, Daniela. 2021. "Una nuova politica si intreccia con le nostre vite." *Labsus* 2 march. Retrieved March 7, 2025 (<https://www.labsus.org/2021/03/una-nuova-politica-si-intreccia-con-le-nostre-vite/>).
- Ciaffi, Daniela. 2023. "Local democracy will save democracy". *Alda Europe* June. Retrieved March 8, 2025 (<https://www.alda-europe.eu/resources/local-democracy-agencies-report-2022/>).

Ciaffi, Daniela. 2024. "Sull'interesse generale nella cura dei beni comuni." *La cura dei beni comuni tra teoria e prassi*, Milano: Franco Angeli.

Coriat Benjamin, Loizeau Justine and Alix Nicole. 2024. "Les communs de proximité. Origines, caractérisation, perspectives." *Esbic Mars*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 (<https://scienceetbiencommun.pressbooks.pub/communsdeproximite/>).

Faré, Ida. 2013. "Sapere femminile e cura della città." *Territorio della ricerca su insediamenti e ambiente*, June, pp. 85-92.

Federici, Silvia. 2021. *Reincantare il mondo: femminismo e politica dei commons*. Verona: Ombre Corte.

Fisher, B and Tronto, Joan. 1990. "Toward a feminist theory of caring." *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, New York: The SUNY Press.

Gamelli, Ivano. 2001. *Pedagogia del corpo: Educare oltre le parole*. Roma: Meltemi.

Granata, Elena. 2023. *Il senso delle donne per la città*. Torino: Einaudi.

Joly, Andrea. 2024. "Mappa dell'affluenza a Torino: Quartiere per quartiere." *La Stampa* 10 June. Retrieved March 8, 2025 (https://www.lastampa.it/torino/2024/06/10/news/affluenza_elezioni_europee_regionali_torino_mappa_astensionismo_quartieri-14378735/)

Tronto, Joan. 2019. "Caring architecture." *Critical care. Architecture and urbanism for a broken planet*, Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Kern, Leslie. 2015. *Feminist city. A field guide*. Canada: Between the lines.

Labsus. 2025. "Ambiente e comunità: Rapporto sull'amministrazione condivisa dei beni comuni". *Labsus*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 (<https://www.labsus.org/rapporto-labsus-2024/>)

Marinelli, Annalisa. 2002. *Etica della cura e progetto*. Napoli: Liguori Editore.

Marinelli, Annalisa. 2009. "Coniugare diritto e responsabilità: Il modello della cura." *Ri-Vista ricerche per la progettazione del paesaggio*, July, pp. 29-36.

Marinelli, Annalisa. 2015. *La città della cura: Ovvero, perché una madre ne sa più dell'urbanista*. Napoli: Liguori Editore.

Pioggia, Alessandra. 2024. *Cura e pubblica amministrazione: Come il pensiero femminista può cambiare in meglio le nostre amministrazioni*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Pulcini, Elena. 2010. "Per una filosofia della cura." *La società degli individui*, pp. 1-10.

Sánchez de Madariaga, Inés. 2013. "The mobility of care. Introducing new concepts in urban transportation." *Fair shared cities: The impact of gender planning in Europe*, London: Routledge.

Semi, Giovanni and Bolzoni, Magda. 2022. *L'osservazione partecipante: Una guida pratica*. Bologna: Il Mulino.