

Listening to Unheard Voices in Urban Public Space. The Cases of *Ruskin Square* and *Plaça d'en Baró*

Escuchando a voces no escuchadas en el espacio urbano público. Los casos de *Ruskin Square* y *Plaça d'en Baró*

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Abstract

The paper explores the concept of 'listening to unheard voices' in the urban environment as a design intention and strategy that contributes to an inclusive and alternative approach to urban public space, considering and promoting the imperatives of caring that such space should deliver to the city and its inhabitants. The ideas discussed in the paper find their background in the research on the concept of care in feminist urbanism and feminist studies in general, and specifically in relation to the model of the Caring City, promoting a city that places care at its centre, and aims to include a wider selection of citizens in the construction of the public good.

Through the analysis of two case studies of public spaces designed by solo-women architecture practices, this paper identifies an alternative relational paradigm which gives space to unheard voices in the urban environment through processes of inclusion and participation. The two cases, *Plaça d'en Baró* in Santa Coloma de Gramenet (Barcelona, Spain), designed by Catalan architectural collective Equal Saree, and *Ruskin Square* in the London Borough of Croydon (London, UK) designed by British architectural practice muf architecture/art, have implemented the concept of listening to 'unheard voices' offering insights into the contribution of women to the urban environment and how it is transformed, shaped, and used.

Keywords

Women Architects, Inclusive City, Caring City, Feminist Practices, Listening Processes

Resumen

El artículo explora el concepto de 'escuchar a voces no escuchadas' en el entorno urbano como intención y estrategia de diseño urbano que contribuya a una perspectiva alternativa y inclusiva del espacio público, considerando y promoviendo las tareas de cuidado que el espacio público tendría que ofrecer a la ciudad y sus habitantes. Las ideas presentadas en este artículo encuentran su contexto en la investigación sobre el tema de los cuidados en el urbanismo feminista y en los estudios feministas en general, en particular en relación al modelo de la Ciudad Cuidadora, la cual promueve una ciudad que ponga el cuidado en el centro, apoyándolo y distribuyéndolo, y que aspira a incluir grupos de población más amplios para la construcción del bien común.

A través de la análisis de dos casos de estudio diseñados por equipos de mujeres arquitectas, el artículo identifica un paradigma relacional alternativo que da espacio a voces no escuchadas en el entorno urbano a través de procesos de inclusión y participación. Los dos casos, *Plaça d'en Baró* en Santa Coloma de Gramenet (Barcelona, España), diseñado por el colectivo feminista Equal Saree, y *Ruskin Square* en London Borough of Croydon (Londres, Reino Unido), diseñado por el estudio de arquitectura muf architecture/art, ha implementado el concepto de dar voz a las voces no escuchadas de maneras diversas y ricas, ofreciendo ideas sobre la contribución de las mujeres al entorno urbano y cómo ello se transforma, se forma y se usa.

Palabras clave

Mujeres Arquitectas, Ciudad inclusiva, Ciudad cuidadora, Prácticas feministas, Procesos de escucha

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Introduction

This paper explores the concept of ‘listening to unheard voices’ in the urban environment through the narrative of two case studies of urban public spaces designed by solo-women architectural practices, which interpret and engage with the concept in different and enriching ways. In this context, ‘listening to unheard voices’ is intended as a design strategy that contributes to an “inclusive [approach] to many different forms of knowledge relevant to inhabiting the planet”,¹ promoting the caring duties that public space should deliver to the city and its inhabitants.

The selected case studies are Ruskin Square in the London Borough of Croydon (London, UK), designed by British practice muf architecture/art, and *Plaça d'en Baró* in Santa Coloma de Gramenet (Barcelona, Spain), designed by Catalan collective Equal Saree. Through the analysis of the case studies, this research investigates the design strategies, actions, and processes of these architects, and explores specific contributions these women bring to the design of urban public spaces, in terms of meanings, forms, and uses.

The two cases share the intention to listen to voices that generally remain unheard in the city, including children, caregivers, women, minorities, and the natural environment. Bringing the most vulnerable users to the centre of the design process, these case studies articulate the importance of a city that cares for everyone, offering a new understanding of the role of the architect as a ‘facilitator’, who creates the conditions for unheard voices to find their place in the urban environment.

Public Space and the Caring City

The ideas discussed in the paper find their background in research and scholarship about the concept of care in feminist urbanism and feminist studies.² Following feminist theories developed since the 1970s, care has become a critical concept for reconsidering the relationships among the built environment, nature, and human beings, particularly for disciplines such as architecture and urbanism.³ As Joan C. Tronto and Berenice Fisher suggest, caring should be viewed “as a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue with, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible”.⁴ Similarly, Angelika Fitz and Elke Krasny focus on the concept of interdependence, observing how today’s economical and societal crisis is asking architecture and urbanism to consider the interdependence of global inhabitation and continued liveability.⁵ Furthermore, according to Tronto, we should think of changing the traditional approach to public space, fundamentally by building relationships with environments, people, flora, and fauna - that exist through time as well as in space.⁶ Therefore, feminist urbanism claims the social importance of care, and not to exclusively associate women with the caring role, but rather to assume that everybody is dependent on one another and the environment and, consequently, that care should be considered as a collective responsibility.⁷

Fisher and Tronto indicate four main aspects of care to help explain the nature of care practices: “caring about, caring for, care giving, and care receiving”,⁸ and added a fifth phrase: ‘caring with’. These phases stress the importance of a relational way of thinking about care in architecture.⁹ These reflections on the concept of care take shape in the model of the ‘Caring City’, promoting a city that places care at its centre and, according to feminist geographer Leslie Kern, has the potential to spread and support care work.¹⁰

Similarly, Col·lectiu Punt 6 discusses the concept of the Caring City¹¹ proposing a new urban paradigm in which people should be at the centre of decision-making processes, taking into account the diversity of people’s experiences and needs in

1 Elke Krasny, “Architecture and Care,” in *Critical Care. Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet*, ed. Angelika Fitz and Elke Krasny (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019), 34.

2 Fitz and Krasny suggest that care has gained attention since the imposition of austerity measures and the dissolution of welfare provisions following the restructuring of the Western model of the welfare state from the 1970s onwards, and the dissolution of the communism model in the Eastern Bloc. See: Fitz and Krasny, “Introduction,” in *Critical Care*, 12.

3 Joan C. Tronto, “Caring Architecture,” in *Critical Care*, 26.

4 Joan C. Tronto and Berenice Fisher, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring,” in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women’s Lives*, ed. Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 40.

5 Fitz and Krasny, “Introduction,” 13.

6 Tronto, “Caring Architecture,” 28.

7 Tronto, “Caring Architecture,” 29.

8 Tronto and Fisher, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring,” 40.

9 Five categories explained in: Tronto, “Caring Architecture,” 30-32.

10 Leslie Kern, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World* (London/New York: Verso, 2020), 70-71.

11 Col·lectiu Punt 6, *Urbanismo feminista por una transformación radical de los espacios de vida* (Barcelona: Virus Editorial, 2019).

terms of uses, times, and spaces. Thus, the fundamental change that the Caring City proposes is a focus on real human beings and their needs at all levels of planning, prioritising the creation of a network for people's everyday lives.¹² These general principles behind the Caring City have expanded into deepening the analysis of reality, prioritising the everyday experience and the diversity of people, considering proximity and functional 'promiscuity'¹³ - intended as diversity of uses, users, and times - as urban qualities, valuing the reproductive and care tasks of society, breaking social and disciplinary hierarchies, interrelating different aspects of life and space, and recognising functional and body diversity. Therefore, as Jane Jacobs suggests, public space should offer space to a diversity of activities and needs, promoting and facilitating sociability, interaction, and common life.¹⁴

In the Caring City, public spaces are accessible to everybody, without barriers, thus, all bodies are welcome and accommodated.¹⁵ They are safe not only because of sufficient light and signage but also because of the presence of people and a sense of community.

Furthermore, the model of the Caring City gives care and reproductive work a central place in our society and considers them essential in the design of an inclusive city,¹⁶ acknowledging their contribution to the economy and society, thereby changing the dynamic of productive and reproductive work.¹⁷

Arias Laurino and Muxi Martínez¹⁸ suggest that the separation between the personal, social, productive, and reproductive spheres of life,¹⁹ constitutes one of the issues of contemporary cities since it impedes connections between spaces necessary to develop everyday life. A Caring City should also be "inclusive, caring, comfortable, sociable, and playful",²⁰ investing public space with an enormous responsibility for the development of people's lives. These reflections point out the importance of the configuration of the physical environment in sustaining and promoting care beyond the boundaries of private homes.²¹ Therefore, public space should be designed to give 'care' more space, relevance, and material form.

A further interesting aspect of care in the city relates to the capacity of architects to resist the over-determination of a city's built form and social functions and to create an open city that is "never complete and it enables its inhabitants to shape and transform its design as their needs change".²² The responsibility of architects to craft materials and their impacts can be considered as an act of care since, "in each instance, the contextual nature of caring design, and the different ways in which architects articulate an ethic of care in making others' concerns their own, is apparent".²³

Objectives and Cases Studies

Listening is the act of paying attention or hearing with thoughtful attention but also, with a more active and purposeful nuance, an act of being alert to catch an unexpected sound.²⁴

Both the everyday activities in public space and its design are affected by power differentials in terms of voices represented which can openly influence decisions relating to it, and which are therefore listened to. As argued by many theorists, architects and urban planners, cities have been primarily intended for middle-aged, physically able, and wealthy men.²⁵ These were the same men who traditionally designed the spaces that were dedicated to them and who would also have access to such spaces. In this tautological context, the conversation around public space has been more an act of self-reflection or a monologue rather than a dialogue, and 'listening' in the sense of caring about what someone had to say, and how, had

12 Zaida Muxí Martínez, Roser Casanovas, Adriana Ciocoletto, Marta Fonseca, and Blanca Gutiérrez Valdivia, "¿Qué aporta la perspectiva de género al urbanismo?," *Feminismo/s* 17 (June 2011): 113. <https://doi.org/10.14198/fem.2011.17.06>

13 Muxí Martínez, Casanovas, Ciocoletto, Fonseca, and Gutiérrez Valdivia, "¿Qué aporta la perspectiva de género al urbanismo?," 113.

14 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

15 Eva Garcia-Chueca, "Cómo avanzar hacia ciudades feministas después de la pandemia," *Crítica Urbana* 4, n° 17 (2021): 70.

16 Muxí Martínez, Casanovas, Ciocoletto, Fonseca and Gutiérrez Valdivia, "¿Qué aporta la perspectiva de género al urbanismo?," 108.

17 Historically reproductive activities are relegated to the domestic realm and are not considered in urban planning nor calculated in the economy. According to Criado-Pérez, women do 75% of the world's unpaid care work contributing an estimated \$10 trillion to annual global GDP. Caroline Criado Perez, *Invisible Women: exposing data bias in a world designed for men* (New York: Adam Press, 2019), 24-28.

18 Daniela Arias, and Zaida Muxí Martínez, "Aportaciones feministas a las arquitecturas y las ciudades para un cambio de paradigma," *Hábitat y Sociedad* 11 (November 2018): 5-12.

19 Arias and Martínez, "Aportaciones feministas", 8.

20 Kerns, *Feminist City*, 15.

21 Charlotte Bates, Rob Imrie, and Kin Kullman, "Configuring the Caring City: Ownership, Healing, Openness," in *Care and Design: Bodies, Buildings, Cities* eds. Charlotte Bates, Rob Imrie, and Kin Kullman (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 96.

22 Bates, Imrie, and Kullman, "Configuring the Caring City," 109.

23 Bates, Imrie, and Kullman, "Configuring the Caring City," 97.

24 "Listen," Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed March 9, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/listen>.

25 Zaida Muxí Martínez, "Ciudad próxima: urbanismo sin género," *Ingeniería y territorio* 75 (2006): 68-75.

26 Maria, Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of care: speculative ethics in more than human worlds* (Minneapolis: London University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 58.

a quite limited meaning and range. As Puig de la Bellacasa claims: “Listening, like speaking, is not neutral. Listening with care is an active process of intervening in the count of whom and what is ratified as concerned; it affects the representation of things”.²⁶ Therefore, in the traditional production of public space the process of listening has neglected many actors speaking “from below”.²⁷ This paper aims to explore what ‘listening’ means when public space is designed by female-led practices.

The questions and analytical lenses implied by such an inquiry address the whole interval of creation of public space, spanning the past, present, and future, as listening, in its inherent interdependence to care, is relational and emphasises the process and interconnections over the completed artefact. From this perspective, the projects are examined to understand what the terms of such processes of listening are, what listening means to both the designers and the other actors involved, which intentions are the drivers and goals of such activity, and what are the physical and relational outcomes of listening.

The two case studies were selected to represent different approaches to the idea of “listening to unheard voices”²⁸ in the urban environment. Rather than making a comparison of differences and similarities, this paper aims at extending the array of possible approaches to the Caring City. Both represent what Tronto defines as “alternative relational paradigms” as they apply a care-centred approach to the design of the city and public space and suggest alternative ways to include larger and larger sections of the population in the construction of the public good.

Plaça d'en Baró by Equal Saree (2019)

Plaça d'en Baró is in Santa Coloma de Gramenet, Barcelona. As Saldaña, Cardona, Goula and Muxí Martínez²⁹ explain, long before Equal Saree's intervention, the local council has been committed to equality and inclusion of the diversity of people in its community. Within this context, in 2016, Col·lectiu Punt 6 developed an urban analysis of the suburb from a gender perspective, specifically focusing on the spaces dedicated to playgrounds, and organising a ‘Jane's Walk’ to explore the centre of Santa Coloma.³⁰

Additionally, in 2017 the municipality received funding from the European Union for the improvement of less favoured urban areas and approved the project ‘Riu Nord suburb for pedestrians’ to give space back to pedestrians, improving safety, and public space.³¹

Within this context of a committed body of ‘agents of care’, the city council invited Dafne Saldaña, Helena Cardona, and Julia Goula from the feminist collective Equal Saree to start a participative process involving local children in the analysis and design of the square³² to transform *Plaça d'en Baró* into a playground and a space for the community.

The project: approach, methods, process

In 2016, the collective initiated a participatory process with children between the ages of 6 and 12, engaging them in imagining the new square through play and collaboration. To obtain a broader vision of the needs of the local community, participation was progressively expanded to caregivers and the elderly, groups usually neglected in the creation of public spaces but identified as relevant potential users of this square.

The first meetings were directly organised in *Plaça d'en Baró*. In the first session, Equal Saree acted as ‘translators’, disseminating the intentions of the city council to

27 Sandra Harding, *Sciences from Below: Feminisms, Postcolonialities, and Modernities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

28 Tronto, “Caring Architecture,” 29.

29 Dafne Saldaña, Helena Cardona, Julia Goula, and Zaida Muxí Martínez, “La co-creación del espacio público como estrategia para ciudades educadoras,” *Kultur* 6, nº 11 (2019): 12. Equal Saree was established in 2010 and is based in Barcelona, Spain.

30 “About Jane's Walk: Barcelona”, accessed November 12, 2021, <http://janeswalk.org/spain/barcelona/>

31 “Barri per a vianants,” Ajuntament de Santa Coloma de Gramenet, accessed November 12, 2021, <https://www.gramenet.cat/es/sites/barrio-para-los-peatonos/el-barrio-de-peatonos-en-riu-nord/>

32 Saldaña, Cardona, Goula and Muxí Martínez, “La co-creación del espacio público,” 113.

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Figure 1. Participatory workshop in *Placà d'en Baró*, with children organised and led by Equal Saree.

transform the square and collecting participants' opinions on the weaknesses and strengths of it. (figure 1) 'Translation' is necessary between the different languages used by the town council and the children, a pivotal act in the process of listening since it created the opportunity for a conversation between children and adults.

In the second meeting, with the help of a model, the collective explained some of the new functions envisioned during the first activity. Once the interest was established the focus shifted onto children, manifesting their desires with different project proposals. (figure 2) These plans were eventually presented to the town council directly using models and drawings from the workshops to foster a conversation between civil servants and children.

Starting from these inputs Equal Saree developed a first draft of the project and presented it back to the children, organising a feedback session to refine the design and simultaneously inform the community on the development of their projects.

The final design resulting from this articulated process was a square open to the urban surroundings, hosting different spaces for different uses. Spaces and forms resonate with the process of co-creation with children: its colourful aspects, materials, paths, playground structures, and trees are all outcomes of a process that configured a space reflecting the characters and needs of the community that will inhabit it.³³

It is through this multilateral process, hinged around Equal Saree, that the numerous actors involved develop a new understanding of the values that a public space conceived and created by and for different groups could bring. As Saldaña explains, placing children at the core of urban planning expands benefits of this approach to other parts of society, as it allows designers and citizens to develop and test urban models capable of providing equal opportunities and rights to everybody.³⁴

Ruskin Square by Muf Architecture/Art (2010-2018)

Ruskin Square, the second case study, is located just next to East Croydon Station in south London and stretches along its railroads. It is part of a large mixed-use redevelopment site of 13,000m² of building footprint and around 5,400m² of public space and was led by the development company Stanhope Schroders PLC.

In the early 2010s, the area had already been vacant for several years following the demolition of some office buildings; it was part of a large redevelopment project

33 Saldaña, Cardona, Goula and Muxí Martínez, "La co-creación del espacio público," 126.

34 Saldaña, Cardona, Goula and Muxí Martínez, "La co-creación del espacio público," 116.



Figure 2. Children presenting their project to the City Council and the community.

of the borough for which developers and owners were still awaiting permission to build.

In that gap period before construction Katherine Clarke and Liza Fior, founders of muf architecture/art,³⁵ started an action-research on the vacant lot, in what was defined as a ‘meanwhile strategy’.³⁶ The practice, exemplified by the motto “Value what’s there, nurture the possible, define what’s missing”,³⁷ imagined and enacted a series of research actions, design strategies, and, more broadly, activist activities, in the belief that any place at any given time carries a set of values that only needs to be unearthed. Within this value system and with the declared aim to subvert the classical business brief, where the public realm would follow the buildings, muf triggered a confrontational collaboration/negotiation with Stanhope Schrodgers PLC³⁸ with an attitude “unafraid to challenge any client who thinks design is done and dusted early on in a project”.³⁹

Muf’s approach highlights the importance of collaboration at different levels of the design process. As Rendell suggests, in their working method collaboration and exchange is crucial: between art and architecture, through the participation of users in the design process and through the collaboration among different actors.⁴⁰ Rendell identifies in muf a particular angle to architectural practice, which proposes that the process itself is the product. Placing people and their personal experiences at the centre of their design process, muf has developed strategies to give voice to the local community that reach beyond traditional public engagement practices, consultations, or co-designing strategies.

35 muf architecture/art was established in 1995; their practice is based in London.

36 Fitz and Krasny, *Critical Care*, 18.

37 Katherine Shonfield, Adrian Dannatt, Rosa Ainley, and muf, *This Is What We Do: A Muf Manual* (London: Ellipsis, 2001).

38 Shonfield, Dannatt, Ainley, and muf, *This Is What We Do: A Muf Manual*, 171.

39 “Muf”, muf architecture/art, accessed October 20, 2021, <http://muf.co.uk/profile/>

40 Jane Rendell, “A Way with Words: Feminists Writing Architectural Design Research,” in *Design Research in Architecture: An Overview*, ed. Murray Fraser, 117-136 (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2013).

The project: approach, methods, process

The project started with a set of action-research activities: mapping public stakeholders, identifying the underlying social potential in the area, cataloguing the wilderness that had colonised the site.

Most of the activities put in place were set in response to the propositions to attract people to the weedy and wild landscape and make them aware of its potential and inherent values and help them find beauty in it.

During this process, muf identified vestiges of past and present cultural activities in the soon-to-be demolished Warehouse Theatre situated just across the station, and in the social potential provided by the Refugee Cricket Project which brings young refugees and asylum-seekers together to play sport as a means of integration and

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which had a large influence in the immigrant community of Croydon. These two catalysts led the practitioners to design the Garden Theatre, an open-air stage for performances and two practice nets for cricket (2012).

Every action organised by muf was intended to be at the same time participative and viewed, and to create curiosity and engagement. With this twofold agenda, in 2012, muf organised an informal series of guided walks - by architects, botanists, artists - to provide the visitors with tools to interpret the semi-wild and semi-constructed nature of the area.

On one of the platforms created in the lot, they facilitated a Lunch Club targeting nearby office workers to enjoy a sociable yet quiet place and to get connected with the wilderness surrounding the square. The Lunch Club eventually attracted people interested in the development of Croydon to discuss informally issues and ideas about its future and transformed passive stakeholders into active 'agents of care'. Moreover, this weekly activity, consisting mainly of setting out, accommodating, eating, and tidying the area, was also visible from the station and became a performance *per se*.⁴¹

Finally, permission for construction was granted and the temporary project for Ruskin Square was to be superseded by the permanent one. In this period of transformation, where the temporary project was demolished and with the design of the new public space yet to be finalised, muf pushed their agenda of action research a step further organising a series of artistic interventions that were aimed once again at engaging residents, especially the most marginalised, in the process of transformation of the area, making them part of a creative process to establish an art strategy for the new Ruskin Square, and forging collaborations to deliver it.

In this period, they organised the Festival of Toil and the Dinner Debate, both commissioned by Stanhope Schrodgers PLC who became convinced by muf's unconventional methods to explore a different process to design public space.

The process was divided into two steps: firstly, a workshop with nearby social enterprises and a team of local young care people to create cutlery, dishware, and ovens out of scrap from the ongoing construction site and to bake bread. The products of the workshop were then used at the Dinner Debate organised with local and international experts from both public and private sectors. The outcome of the whole process was a brief for a piece of public art to be executed by artists Cohen and Van Balen. The artists created a sculpture called *Every Increased Possession Loads Us with New Weariness*⁴² out of materials used for the ongoing construction of the office buildings in Ruskin Square. These materials were unmade and deconstructed, transformed into large artificial stone minerals in the artistic effort of inverting the construction process.

The last segment of the articulated design process focused on the design of the final and permanent Ruskin Square. For this muf relied and built on all the outcomes, findings, and synergies created by their activities.

Findings: Multifaceted Interpretations of 'Listening to Unheard Voices

Plaça d'en Baró: a Systematic Approach to Include Children in the Urban Discourse

Equal Saree's participatory approach manifestly addresses gaps in the production of space. The most interesting design move they make is shifting the role of the child from object of care to an active participant in the design process. In so doing, Equal Saree manages to attract and spark curiosity in public space not only in

41 "Ruskin Square Theatre Garden", muf architecture/art, accessed November 1, 2021, <https://issuu.com/mufarchitectureartllp/docs/ruskingsquaregarden>

42 The title refers to a famous quote by John Ruskin, contained in Appendix IV in: John Ruskin, *Pamphlets*. (United Kingdom: G. Allen, 1875).



Figure 3. *Plaça d'en Baró*.



Figure 4. Platforms in the 'Caring City' in *Plaça d'en Baró*.

children but also in their caregivers, usually women, and therefore engages in the conversation two distinct and interconnected vulnerable groups usually left out of the conversation.

This enables Equal Saree to expand the brief of the project defined by the children in the workshops, from the 'active' city and the 'diverse' city, to integrate the 'caring' city.

The 'caring city' of Plaça d'en Baró, epitomised by a set of urban furniture arranged as single benches or combined platforms, stretches into the intersecting strips of the 'active city', which starts from the access points to the square and crosses over it and overlooks the 'diverse city' created by the play areas (figure 3). The furniture is organised to allow an open sight line on both the pathways and onto the areas of the 'diverse city' dedicated to children's activities. The caregivers are provided with a space that supports simultaneously their main tasks of control, allowing an open and unobtrusive gaze on the playing areas and the access/pathways but also enabling the connections with people seated on the other platforms (figure 4).

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Figure 5. *Plaça d'en Baró*. Poster displayed in the square that explains the participation process.

The platforms became a beacon to the different voices and uses of the place transforming a seating arrangement in a shared social space with a multifunctional vocation.

Equal Saree's idea of imagining a public space with children is a practice where the city becomes an educational space that stretches its boundaries to include personal and collective reflections⁴³ (figure 5). Participation and co-creation with children are key aspects in terms of a transfer of power and knowledge between traditional actors to youth; Equal Saree bestows kids with a status of equal and relevant stakeholders. The idea of co-responsibility offered to the children educates and empowers them and collective participation is applied as a social innovation tool with educative and transformative intentions.

The project reveals distinct yet interconnected caring design actions: it cares about the design of a participatory process focused on children's inclusion both in terms of subjects and objects of care, transforming them into new agents of care; it cares for the participatory process focusing on its explicit and implicit educational aims, and it focuses on the physical outcomes of the design by generating a space that cares for its users.

Finally, when exploring the work of Equal Saree, a distinctive trait in their participative methodology emerges. The design practice seems to be particularly able and willing to integrate with clarity and honesty their own point of view with voices to the choral discourse they create with the other stakeholders to achieve and boost a feminist agenda for the public realm.

Ruskin Square: a Poetic Approach to Inclusion

Ruskin Square is a complex and stratified project that exemplifies muf's approach to the public realm. As Williams suggests, "they recognise that the solution to every problem is not necessarily a building, and that it is possible to design without drawing lines".⁴⁴ In this project, the process is indeed the focus of the design rather than the final outcomes of the built environment.

43 Saldaña, Cardona, Goula, and Muxí, "La co-creación del espacio público," 113.

44 Williams Finn, "Designing Up Stream. Rebuilding Agency Through new forms of Public Practice," *Architectural Design* 5, n° 88 (September 2018): 104-109.

Figure 6. Seating area in Ruskin Square recalling the oval chamber in which Ruskin has taught for many years in the nearby adult college.



Figure 7. 'Every Increased Possession Loads Us with New Weariness', Sculpture by Revital Cohen and Tuur Van Balen.



They follow a bottom-up, people-centred approach; it is in the palimpsest of stratified actors, objectives, artefacts, and hopes that muf digs and connects dots to eventually give a space and a time to every relevant and representative element of the place. This approach of 'close looking' to the place makes evident specific contextual histories and uses and let muf unveil the latent potential of the place and how it can be transformed for the benefit of the local communities.

A key component of muf's process is developing modes of representation that "impart a visual and tangible expression of public stakeholders as part of the design process".⁴⁵ The designers immerse themselves in the site and the community, observing the small scale of the lived experience, how people appropriate and use it, what are the social dynamics, and how a sense of collective local identity is delivered. As Fior, Clarke, and Handler affirm, their "research methods are not exhaustive and sometimes begin with casual encounters and a willingness to be led, quite literally, astray by conversations 'in the field'".⁴⁶

45 Emma Sheppard-Simms, "Extra/ordinary," *Landscape Architecture Australia* 127 (August 2010): 28.

46 Liza Fior, Katherine Clarke, and Sophie Handler, "It's all about getting what you want - what we want is to make work that fits," *Architectural Design* 75, n° 2 (April 2005): 56-59.

The first voice traced in this process lies in the history of the area. The visions and hopes of one of its most preminent inhabitants, to which the square itself is dedicated, are given homage by the central oval timber stage that recalls the

shape of the room in which Ruskin used to teach in the nearby adult college (figure 6). A single, mature horse chestnut tree, a remainder from the 1970's landscape, was carefully retained to become a welcoming feature of the space. A remnant of previous cycles of development, the tree is symbolic of the resilience and longevity of nature in the urban settlements. Nature can be traced as a second voice unearthed and manifested in the decisions to keep the weeds growing in the vacant lot and to establish guided walks to explore their varieties and possible uses during the 'meanwhile project'.

Nature also becomes the end product and reference of the artistic intervention for the square. The statue 'Every Increased Possession Loads Us with New Weariness' (Figure 7) is an artificial rock with gems and minerals where "by reversing the supply chains of construction parts towards an interpretation of the raw matter, Cohen and Van Balen's work reflects on the energy, people and places through which these material transformations were made".⁴⁷ The artists aimed at visualising the silent and invisible labour that lies beneath every piece of the built environment in which we live and encapsulated it in the symbolic form of a human-made stone.

Bringing to light the social implications of the silent mass of people creating and living in a place is part of yet another aspect of muf's work. During the 'meanwhile' project, they were involved in the creation of the Lunch Club to attract and engage people interested in the redevelopment of the area in an informal way. This light-hearted way to create or materialise a community around the area, whether of office employers, citizens, or activists seems to be a relevant and unique trait of muf's practice.

In this project, muf enacted a process of 'expansion', extending the numbers of stakeholders who would become agents of care, the timespan to care about, which includes past, present and future under a large, adaptable and multiform umbrella and the targets of care: people living and working in the area, history and past symbols, natural and artificial landscape.

Fior openly addresses such reality,⁴⁸ stating that Ruskin Square epitomises several facets of muf's methodology, especially those privileging human activities over the built form, and consequently evaluating a project as a continuum that doesn't begin or end but rather appears as a moment that germinates out of what already exists there to create the context for what will happen next.

At the end of this process, it becomes clear how muf managed to retain, in a public space that is firmly part of a business-oriented district, an unexpected feeling of openness and inclusiveness with the employment of benches and platforms of different dimensions and shapes that help attract a variety of users to the square, including children that can play there with the lion sculptures designed by artists Tudor and Lely.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to explore the *modus operandi* undertaken by two women-led architectural practices that offer alternatives to the traditional praxis of architecture. Although obviously caring for the final built form, spatial configuration and shape are perceived as secondary and incidental results of their design processes. These forms arise as one of many possible manifestations of the outcomes and relationships established between the designers and the other actors involved in the process.

The two projects show notable differences in terms of processes and types of intervention. *Plaça d'en Baró* is a city council-led intervention for a public square and a playground, while Ruskin Square is an urban space within a private mixed-

47 "Ruskin Square Public Art, Update May 2016", muf architecture/art, accessed October 20, 2021, [https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/19984/28/public%20art%20strategy%20\(document%20from%20MUF\).pdf](https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/19984/28/public%20art%20strategy%20(document%20from%20MUF).pdf).

48 Rowan Moore, "Ruskin Square, Croydon – Review," *The Guardian, Sun*, October 28, 2012, accessed October 20, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/oct/28/muf-ruskin-square-croydon-review>.

use intervention. Despite such differences, both are focused on extended and articulated participative processes where time and iterations are relevant aspects of their relational approaches.

Both groups of women practitioners subvert and challenge the idea that planning from below and 'soft' people-centred design moves, like community outreach, are not ascribed the same kind of value and importance as designing the 'hard' infrastructure of the city.⁴⁹ They establish an innovative relational paradigm, where the relationships among users, designers, places, memories, and nature, all together produce a fertile system guiding the design decisions.

Both aim at bestowing a sense of agency to whomever will participate in the process, making clear their responsibilities and rights to the public city and thereby transforming historically unheard voices into possible agents of care. Both muf and Equal Saree search for and create alternative ways to include ever-larger sectors of the population in the construction of the public good.

Equal Saree's project represents a clear and well-organised exercise in terms of methodological rigour, transparency, and explicitness of the objectives. The structure of the project's participative process makes it a model of best practice and a didactic toolkit in engaging with different segments of the population and echoing their voices in public space. Each part of their process could be used in a step-by-step guide for an inclusive approach to space production.

Conversely, Muf's approach is non-linear, more complex and, poetical. The process doesn't begin with a precise objective but rather builds progressively on what the place has to offer in terms of existing and potential possibilities. Muf's strategy is to raise interest and curiosity in the many possible actors and stakeholders, and to transform passive or less involved inhabitants into active agents of care through activities that will be perceived as, at least, marginal to the architectural canon.

Both projects create spaces through forms, materials, colour, artworks, and ambiances that reverberate those voices that usually remain unheard; both the "design" processes and the physical built evidence can be seen and studied as caring design strategies. As Kern claims, "the extent to which anyone can simply "be" in urban space tells us a lot about who has power, who feels their right to the city is a natural entitlement, and who will always be considered out of place".⁵⁰ These two projects both extend the idea of 'being' to one of 'being represented' and 'being present to the process'. In this sense, they can be studied and appreciated as alternative ways to signify the representation of unheard voices in the urban discourse. These case study projects unveil a caring approach to the design of the city and an assumption of responsibility in shaping the urban environment shared by both designers and inhabitants. The process of creating a bond between space and its users is a slow and caring one. Slow because it requires time for collaboration, conversation, and trust; caring because it involves a commitment from the designers to listening, to seeing the different layers of the place in its tangible and intangible forms. As such, the design processes exemplified by these practices are in themselves acts of care for the environment and its inhabitants.

Figures Sources

Figure 1. Equal Saree, 2016.

Figure 2. Equal Saree, 2016.

Figure 3. Authors, 2021.

Figure 4. Authors, 2021.

Figure 5. Authors, 2021.

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Mujeres, prácticas feministas
y profesionales alternativos
en la arquitectura

Women, Feminist Practices and
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DOROTEA OTTAVIANI
CECILIA DE MARINIS

Listening to Unheard Voices in Urban
Public Space. The Cases of *Ruskin
Square* and *Plaça d'en Baró*

Escuchando a voces no escuchadas en
el espacio urbano público.
Los casos de *Ruskin Square*
y *Plaça D'en Baró*

Figure 6. Geoff Henson, 2021. Flickr, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/croydonclicker/50951684773/in/photostream/>

Figure 7. Matt Brown, 2018. Flickr, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/londonmatt/43777482731>

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