

A New “Book of the City of Ladies”

Book Review / URBANISM

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***Theoretikerinnen des Städtebaus.
Texte und Projekte für die Stadt,***
By Katia Frey and Eliana Perotti (eds.)
Berlin: Reimer, 2015
240 mm x 170 mm
42 b/w illustrations
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***Frauen blicken auf die Stadt.
Architektinnen, Planerinnen, Reformerrinnen.
Theoretikerinnen des Städtebaus II,***
By Katia Frey and Eliana Perotti (eds.)
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Many authors have argued that the exclusion of women in the history of art and architecture is not coincidental but based on deliberate discredit. Christine de Pizan already formulated this accusation in the fourteenth

century in her *Book of the City of Ladies*. To support this argument, she created a reconstructed history of women in which she stressed the achievements and virtues of numerous women since antiquity. The anthologies edited by Katia Frey and Eliana Perotti should be regarded as one more attempt to record in writing the many neglected female contributions by asking how women contributed to the development of modern city planning. They assemble a wide scope of texts written by female theorists, architects, planners, and reformers, who were influential in very different areas. Many of these writings are (re)published and recognized for the first time, foregrounding female achievement of the last 150 years.

The editors are aware that there are and have been quite a few influential women planners and authors like Jane Jacobs, a critical observer of the man-made landscape who seriously challenged the discourse and formulated their special views. Of course, it would be more accurate to say that women are and always have been part of urbanism, but most of their contributions have disappeared from planning history. The problem is that many of them were not part of important networks, therefore, they were not as well known and by now have been more or less erased from history. Frey and Perotti point out that although their names may have become forgotten, many of the female pioneers came up with the most interesting concepts about urban design and had a strong impact on city planning. Of course, some of them were gifted with a famous name like Sybil Moholy-Nagy or could operate within an influential professional network like the American critic Ada Huxtable, and gained attention during their time, but the majority of these contributions seem to have disappeared. By looking at very different approaches of female architects and theorists in city planning (with a special focus on Germany, but not exclusively) the editors tried to excavate some of those doomed perspectives and included original writings by Adelheid Poninska, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, Myra Warhaftig, and others. The ambition of the editors is to establish a strong link between historical viewpoints and the present by asking whether or not these idealistic or challenging visions are still valid today and how they contributed to shaping the urban environments as we experience them today. This discussion is led by a prestigious selection of internationally well-known contemporary theorists, among them Mary Pepchinski, Gerald Adler, Katrin Albrecht, Hilde Heynen, and Rixt Hoekstra.

Volume I covers the period from the last third of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century, while Volume II extends it up to the present. Each draws from a research project and an archive of source texts, written by around 300 female authors from the nineteenth- to the twenty-first-century. Many of these authors did not publish in formats traditionally used for theoretical writings like treatises and monographs. Hence the research presented here included many types of primary sources that had been neglected so far by the historiography of city planning, especially journals,

travel literature, belles-lettres, theoretical writings of different specialist fields, even screen-plays, and interviews. The scope of source materials alone shows, that although women were mostly excluded from the operative part of town construction, they were very active in the theoretical field. Both books follow the same structure: Each chapter consists of an analytical article, which introduces an annex of carefully selected source texts written by female theorists. The latter are accompanied by short and very useful biographies of each theorist. Photographs, plans, and other visual source materials provide even more historical contextualization.

The two-volume set was devised at the ETH Zurich (Switzerland) and is a German-language publication with a multilingual leaning. The introductory articles are written in German, while source materials in German, French, Italian, or English are presented each in their original languages, as these languages are considered to be commonly understood in Swiss academia. Source materials written in other languages, for example by Chinese and Russian theorists, were translated into German.

THEORETIKERINNEN DES STÄDTEBAUS. TEXTE UND PROJEKTE FÜR DIE STADT (2015)

The first volume, *Theoretikerinnen des Städtebaus. Texte und Projekte für die Stadt [Female Theorists of City Planning: Texts and Projects for the City]*¹ was published in 2015. Its aim is to document the wide-ranging conceptual contribution of women to the design and understanding of the city in Europe, the Soviet Union and the USA from the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century. The selection of theorist and texts presented by Frey and Perotti enrich the history of town planning with new perspectives that are important for contemporary debates, especially the significance of the social and the public realm. The structure of the book follows considerations of chronology, geographical regions, and themes. At first, the reasons behind the choice of theorists and topics are not fully evident to the readers. Nevertheless, once one continues reading, the multiple cross-references and shared historical contexts become clear, as do the decisions of the editors.

Housing was one of the earliest fields of specialization for female town planners because it fitted well within the gender stereotype of the woman being responsible for the private sphere. Thus, housing was acknowledged as a field of female expertise quite early. The first three chapters focus on housing in a broader sense. Susanne Businger presents texts by Melusina Fay Peirce, Helen Churchill Candee, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Alice Constance Austin in her chapter on "Feminist Theories and their Urbanistic Implications in the American Cooperative Housekeeping Movement (1870 – 1930)."² She asks for the urbanistic consequences deriving from the vision of the collectivization of domestic work and the reception of such ideas by architects. Ulla Terlinden states that women in

Germany played an active role in the discussions on urbanism and housing from the end of the nineteenth century well into the 1930s, but were ignored by historiography, even though there has been an increasing number of studies on that subject since the 1980ies. Within “Philanthropy and Emancipation, Concepts and Practice of Women for Reformist Housing and Urbanism in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,”³ she contextualizes the work of Lily Braun, Marie Elisabeth Lüder, Jenny Apolant, and Erna Meyer. In her article, Gaia Caramellino investigates the contribution of women to the discourse on public housing in New York, sketching the development from settlement movement to welfare project and the central role of the reformer Mary Melinda Kingsbury Simkhovitch (“Von der settlement-Bewegung zum welfare-Projekt. Mary Simkhovitchs Beitrag zum Diskurs über den New Yorker Wohnungsbau“).

Arne Sildatke analyses the doctoral thesis of Marie Frommer, the first female architect with a doctoral degree in Germany (“The Course of a River and Town Development. Marie Frommers Dissertation as Contribution to the Theory of Urban Planning”).⁴ Because Frommer’s theoretical writings remained unpublished and she saw no career opportunities in academia, she chose to work as an independent architect and had a share in the history of architecture and city planning through her designs of facades and advertisements. The next article, “*Metropolis*. The Invention of the Modern Metropolis. Thea von Harbou’s Screenplay and Novel,”⁵ coauthored by Frey and Perotti, also shows how influential practical work could be: *Metropolis* (1925-26) is often considered the first science fiction feature film and the first movie that was inscribed to UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register. It also was influential in shaping the classical iconographic topos of the modern city. Although often attributed to the director Fritz Lang only, it was his actress and writer wife Thea von Harbou, who imagined this seminal vision of a futuristic, modern city. Frey and Perotti complete this chapter on visions of the futuristic city with a section from Mary Bradley Lane’s novel *Mizora: World of Women* (1890), which is regarded as the first feminist technological utopia.

Christiane Post describes the influential work of the two Soviet architects and theorists Milica I. Prochorova and Lujbov’ S. Zalesskaja, whose projects of parks created during the late 1920s became the starting point for a theory of parks for culture and recreation.⁶ Though they designed many projects and published a lot, their *oeuvre* has been hardly recognized – just like the works of so many other Russian producers. Likewise influential, but in a very different context, is the work of their contemporary, the British city planner, editor and teacher Jaqueline Tyrwhitt. As Ellen Shoskes demonstrates in her chapter “Jaqueline Tyrwhitt: From Town Planning to Urban Design,”⁷ work done in the background, translating, helping others to create networks and exchange ideas, have proven crucial to the success of many individuals, but it is hard to trace and to notice by posterity. Tyrwhitt deeply influenced a group of people who founded and formed the

architecture of modernity in Europe and the USA after World War II. The texts presented in the annex show her versatility and the development of her thinking.

City planning was accorded little importance in the academic training of architects in Austria at the beginning of the twentieth century. The first chair for city planning was installed in Vienna as late as 1932. Consequently, the first women theorists of city planning became active in the 1930s and 1940s: Lionore Perin, Ilse Lorenz-Wildt, Slawa Walewa, and Martha Bolldorf-Reitstätter. With their chapter "Concepts of Urbanism by Austrian Architects in the Middle of the Twentieth Century,"⁸ Iris Meder and Ulrike Krippner contextualize the works of these women, who were pioneers in politically difficult times. Like Marie Frommer in Germany, they did not pursue their academic careers and their works remained unknown. Likewise, unknown are the contributions of Swiss women to city planning. Until today, there have been no female city planners in Switzerland. But there have been experts in architecture, politics, as well as amateurs, who have influenced discourses and political discussions on urbanism, as Inge Beckel states in her article "Political, Disorderly, Sensual. Impulses and Contributions to City Planning by Swiss Women."⁹ She gives those influential experts a place in the history of city planning in Switzerland, namely Berta Rahm and Beate Schnitter.

FRAUEN BLICKEN AUF DIE STADT. ARCHITEKTINNEN, PLANERINNEN, REFORMERINNEN. THEORETIKERINNEN DES STÄDTEBAUS II (2019)

The second volume by the editors continues the successful first issue with its inspiring collection of essays on female pioneers in architecture. Published in 2019, it focuses on female contributions to city planning and sheds light on those early and some recent protagonists who provided substantial input to the urban discourse. Most of them still have not received sufficient recognition for their work and therefore, the books' most valuable agenda is to fill the existing historiographical gap. While the content seems to be at first glance a random collection of samples from different times and places all over the world, including Europe, South America, and China, it turns out to cover some few key aspects of contemporary city planning and therefore, the selection proves to be fully justified.

Mary McLeod's first chapter, "Theorists of City Planning and their Concepts – a Reflection"¹⁰ establishes the theoretical frame and lays out the discussion path for the whole book. It serves both as an introduction and elucidates the compilation of essays by introducing the individual authors and their theoretical positions. The content of the book addresses important issues of contemporary urban theory and covers aspects such as green spaces but also the rapid growth of megacities along with accompanying problems such as slums and segregation. While gender studies are used

as an academic tool to question the discourse, original texts are embedded to preserve written historical evidence. One of the key ideas in the current discourse has a rather long tradition – the issue of green spaces in the city. Vittoria Calzolari discussed urban landscapes already in the 1950s and pointed out the importance of public green as a fundamental quality of the city. Recent discussions on ecology and climate change have emphasized the importance of this discussion thereby usually ignoring that its origin can be traced back to the late nineteenth century. Original historical texts by Maria Pasolini, with an introduction by Katrin Albrecht, in “The Rediscovery of Italian Building Art and Garden Art. Maria Pasolini’s Contribution to Urban Theory in Italy after 1900,”¹¹ provide an intriguing insight into Italian architecture garden planning and demonstrate female interest in this topic already more than a century ago.

The introduction of social qualities to architecture is often regarded as a typical female contribution to planning and of course, is also included in this book. Adelheid Poninska was a German noblewoman with strong socialist ambitions who focused on housing for the poor and published under a male pseudonym her city theories. She went as far as to argue that the social category is a necessary category of systematical city planning. In “Adelheid Poninska – The Question of Dwelling as Cardinal Point of Urban Theory,”¹² Katia Frey and Eliana Perotti present her unusual biography and discuss her influence among contemporary city planners. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, better known as the wife of her famous husband, Bauhaus-artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, was an important artist and theorist herself. She wrote numerous articles and books, bringing increased attention to vernacular architecture and urban issues. Hilde Heynen introduces the reader to this visionary pioneer of modernism in “The Architectural Essence of Urbanism. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy on the City as ‘Matrix of Man’,”¹³ and included three original texts by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy: “Villas in the Slums” (1960), “In Defense of Architecture” (1962), and “City Planning and the Historical Perspective” (1964). Helena Syrkus was one of the few women who actually had a strong impact on the otherwise male-dominated Modern Movement, the CIAM. In “Writing an alternative History.: Helene Syrkus and the CIAM,”¹⁴ Rixt Hoekstra argues that the CIAM was more of an intellectual network with different, sometimes contradicting voices while Syrkus, who was not only co-author of the Athens Charter of 1933 but collaborated for years closely with Sigfried Giedion and Le Corbusier was the one who carried this movement to Poland. Mary Pepchinsky takes the reader to Germany in the aftermath of World War II and its problems concerning housing and poverty. In her article “For Each Family a Single Woman: The Bauhaus architect Wera Meyer-Waldeck and the Challenges of Accommodating Elderly Women in Post War Western Germany,”¹⁵ she introduces Wera Meyer-Waldeck as a female Bauhaus architect who focused on dwellings for elderly single women. Gerald Adler takes a look at Myra Warhaftig’s commitment in Berlin and her strong impact on city planning in “Between Radical Hope and Pragmatic Implementation: Myra Warhaftig’s Feminist

Architecture Theory and Practice in West-Berlin of the 1980s.”¹⁶ The book ends by discussing three rather individual approaches to urbanism and city planning in various countries. In “Vittoria Calzolari and the Project ‘Landscape’ in Italy: A Versatile Urbanist and Intellectual,”¹⁷ Claudia Mattogno and Cristina Renzoni turn to the 1960s in Italy and present the work of Vittoria Calzolari. Thierry Paquot reflects upon “The Urban Theorist Françoise Choay. A Discourse-Building Propagator of the Discipline,” a female French urbanist and theorist who followed the footsteps of Camillo Sitte. Chen Ting looks at “Wenyuan Wu and the Search for Alternatives in Urban Change in Today’s China,”¹⁸ who suggested rather unusual alternatives to city planning in rural areas China.

CONCLUSION

The authors and editors of *Theoretikerinnen des Städtebaus I* and *II* have done a lot of research to compile this extraordinary collection of texts on the theory of city planning. Their methodological approach is adequate and worthwhile: by taking into account the wider range of “non-classical” formats of work and activities like counseling or networking, writing novels or screenplays, being an expert in a professional body or political institution, the contribution of women to the field of city planning becomes visible. Cleverly selected original texts make the reading pleasantly varied and take you back to the old times. Segments of the original texts have been chosen in a way that allows the reader to easily and quickly engage with the authors’ thoughts.

However, without any previous knowledge of the history and theory of city planning, one may have difficulties to contextualize and to connect the individual chapters. Some more background information might have been helpful to understand better the principles guiding the selection of topics and theorists. Such nitpicking aside, both volumes are strongly recommended for everyone dealing with architecture and city planning, as they provide unfamiliar original resources, profound background information as well as new inspiration for practitioners and researchers. It is also eminently suited for teaching in various academic fields from history to architecture, due to the compelling combination of introductory texts and preselected and contextualized segments of source material. The editors’ laborious work did pay off: the volumes of *Theoretikerinnen des Städtebaus* fill serious *lacunae* in existing research and are a welcome addition to the corpus of interdisciplinary literature on gender, architecture, and urban planning. We are looking forward to further publications about female theorists of city planning by Frey and Perotti.

Notes

1. All chapter titles translated by Alexia Bumbaris and Dörte Kuhlmann.
2. Susanne Businger, "Feministische Theorien und ihre städtebaulichen Folgen in der amerikanischen cooperative housekeeping-Bewegung (1870-1930)," in Katia Frey and Eliana Perotti (eds.), *Theoretikerinnen des Städtebaus. Texte und Projekte für die Stadt* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag GmbH, 2015), 15-46.
3. Ulla Terlinden, "Philanthropie und Emanzipation. Konzepte und Praktiken von Frauen im 19. Und frühen 20. Jahrhundert zur Wohnreform und zum Städtebau," in Frey and Perotti, *Theoretikerinnen*, 47-88.
4. "Flusslauf und Stadtentwicklung. Marie Frommers Dissertation als Beitrag zur Theorie des Städtebaus," (1919)
5. Katia Frey and Eliana Perotti, "Metropolis. Die Erfindung der modernen Großstadt. Thea von Harbous Drehbuch und Roman zum Film," in Frey and Perotti, *Theoretikerinnen*, 155-86.
6. Christine Post, "Milica I. Prochorova und Lubov' S. Zaleskaja. Theoretikerinnen des sowjetischen Parks für Kultur und Erholung," in Frey and Perotti, *Theoretikerinnen*, 187-220.
7. Ellen Shoskes, "Jaqueline Tyrwhitt: Vom town planning zum urban design," in Frey and Perotti, *Theoretikerinnen*, 221-68.
8. Iris Meder and Ulrike Krippner, "Städtebauliche Konzepte österreichischer Architektinnen in der Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts," in Frey and Perotti, *Theoretikerinnen*, 269-312.
9. Inge Beckel, "Politisch, unordentlich, sinnlich. Anstöße und Beiträge von Schweizer Frauen zum Städtebau," in Frey and Perotti, *Theoretikerinnen*, 313-28.
10. Mary McLeod, "Theoretikerinnen des Städtebaus und ihre Konzepte- eine Reflektion," in Frey and Perotti, *Theoretikerinnen*, 11-16.
11. Katrin Albrecht, "Die Wiederentdeckung der italienischen Bau- und Gartenkunst . Maria Pasolinis Beitrag zur Städtebautheorie in Italien nach der Jahrhundertwende," in Katia Frey and Eliana Perotti (eds.), *Frauen blicken auf die Stadt. Architektinnen, Planerinnen, Reformerrinnen. Theoretikerinnen des Städtebaus II* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag GmbH, 2019), 59-96.
12. Katia Frey and Eliana Perotti, "Adelheid Poninska – die Wohnungsfrage als Angelpunkt städtebaulicher Theorie," in Frey and Perotti, *Frauen blicken auf die Stadt*, 17-58.
13. Hilde Heynen, "Die architektonische Essenz des Urbanen. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy über die Stadt als 'Matrix of Man'," in Frey and Perotti, *Frauen blicken auf die Stadt*, 137-62.
14. Rixt Hoekstra, "Eine alternative Geschichte schreiben. Helene Syrkus und die CIAM," in Frey and Perotti, *Frauen blicken auf die Stadt*, 97-126.
15. Mary Pepchinski, "Für jede Familie eine Alleinstehende. Die Bauhaus-Architektin Wera Meyer-Waldeck und die Herausforderungen der Unterbringung älterer Frauen im Westdeutschland der Nachkriegszeit," in Frey and Perotti, *Frauen blicken auf die Stadt*, 163-98.
16. Gerald Adler, "Zwischen radikaler Hoffnung und pragmatischer Realisierung. Myra Warhaftigs feministische Architekturtheorie und -praxis im Westberlin der 1980er-Jahre," in Frey and Perotti, *Frauen blicken auf die Stadt*, 199-230.
17. Claudia Mattogno and Cristina Renzoni, "Vittoria Calzolari und das Projekt 'Landschaft' in Italien. Eine vielseitige Urbanistin und Intellektuelle," in Frey and Perotti, *Frauen blicken auf die Stadt*, 231-74.
18. Chen Ting, "Auf dünnem Eis. Wenyuan Wu und die Suche nach Alternativen für den städtebaulichen Wandel im heutigen China," in Frey and Perotti, *Frauen blicken auf die Stadt*, 315-42.

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