



PUBLIC SPACES, SHARED STRUGGLES: HOW GENDER SHAPES THE URBAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Public spaces are often designed to be neutral and inclusive, yet they frequently fail to accommodate the diverse experiences of the people who use them. Women, and gender minorities face unique challenges in navigating urban environments, from safety concerns to the lack of amenities that consider their specific needs. The article explores the profound ways in which gender influences how individuals perceive, interact with, and move through urban landscapes. This paper highlights the often-overlooked link between urban design and gender equity. It reveals how public spaces – designed without considering lived experiences – can perpetuate fear, and restrict opportunities for participation in public life. Conversely, it examines how inclusive planning can create safer, more welcoming environments that empower all city dwellers.

The research also unpacks the systemic biases embedded in traditional urban planning practices, offering a roadmap for change through participatory processes and innovative interventions. By addressing questions like “Who feels safe walking home at night?” and “Whose needs are prioritized in public transit?”, it calls for a shift in how we approach urban design, placing gender equity at the forefront of planning. The aim is to inspire a collective reimagining of cities as spaces where everyone – not just a privileged few – can thrive.

Key-words: Gendered Urbanism; Embodied Geography; Spatial Justice.

ESPAÇOS PÚBLICOS, LUTAS COMPARTILHADAS: COMO O GÊNERO MOLDA A EXPERIÊNCIA URBANA

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Resumo

Os espaços públicos são muitas vezes concebidos para serem neutros e inclusivos, mas frequentemente não conseguem acomodar as diversas experiências das pessoas que os utilizam. As mulheres e as pessoas pertencentes a minorias de gênero enfrentam desafios únicos ao navegarem por ambientes urbanos, desde preocupações com a segurança até a falta de comodidades que considerem suas necessidades específicas. O artigo explora as formas profundas pelas quais o gênero influencia a maneira como os indivíduos percebem, interagem e se deslocam nas paisagens urbanas. Destaca a ligação frequentemente negligenciada entre o planejamento urbano e a igualdade de gênero, revelando como os espaços públicos – concebidos sem levar em conta as experiências vividas – podem perpetuar o medo e limitar a participação na vida pública. Por outro lado, examina como o planejamento cuidadoso e inclusivo pode favorecer ambientes mais seguros e acolhedores, dando poder a todos os habitantes da cidade.

A investigação também evidencia os preconceitos sistêmicos incorporados nas práticas tradicionais de planejamento urbano, propondo caminhos para a mudança por meio de processos participativos e intervenções inovadoras. Ao abordar questões como “Quem se sente seguro ao voltar para casa à noite?” e “Quais necessidades recebem prioridade nos transportes públicos?”, o artigo convoca uma mudança na forma de conceber o espaço urbano, colocando a equidade de gênero no centro do planejamento. O objetivo é inspirar uma reimaginação coletiva das cidades como espaços onde todos – e não apenas alguns privilegiados – possam prosperar.

Palavras-chave: Urbanismo Feminista; Geografia Corpórea; Justiça Espacial.

INTRODUCTION

Cities are spaces where bodies, practices, and relationships intersect, but the ways these spaces are designed and organized reflect long-standing power dynamics. Decisions about how urban environments are planned, which functions are prioritized, and whose needs are considered, are shaped by a historical and cultural context rooted in a male-dominated and normative perspective (Col·lectiu Punt 6, 2019; Kern, 2021).

What often passes as the ‘neutrality’ of public space is in fact built on a universalizing idea of citizenship and belonging – an idea that conceals the everyday inequalities experienced by those who inhabit the city. As Caroline Criado-Perez puts it:

“The assumption that what is male is universal is a direct consequence of the absence of gender-disaggregated data. Whiteness and masculinity are taken for granted for the simple reason that most other identities are never considered.” (2020, 34).

This so-called universality thus hides exclusions and implicit hierarchies, prioritizing the needs of some while sidelining the experiences of others. Women, girls, and LGBTQIA+ people face a range of material barriers – such as a lack of services, poor accessibility, or insufficient lighting – as well as symbolic ones – mostly fear of crime –, tied to how space is perceived and to the internalization of social roles that dictate who is allowed to move freely through certain places, and who is expected to stay away (Booth et al. 1996; Andreola & Muzzonigro 2024a).

This article examines how artistic-participatory methodologies can contribute to understanding and transforming gendered experiences of urban space. While feminist geography has demonstrated how spatial exclusion is produced at the intersection of norms, infrastructures, and everyday practices, less is known about how situated, creative, and collective processes generate actionable forms of knowledge for planning and policy. By analysing the *TransFemina* laboratory in Modena – developed by Collettivo Amigdala – this

article investigates how participants’ embodied experiences, emotions, and narratives can be mobilised as urban knowledge.

Accordingly, the article addresses three research questions: (1) How do participatory and artistic devices (workshops, collective mapping, performative walks) shape participants’ perceptions of safety, belonging, and legitimacy in public space? (2) What forms of empirical evidence emerge from the Modena laboratory, and how can these be translated into tools or indicators for gender-sensitive urban planning? (3) To what extent does this approach generate knowledge that differs from, complements, or contests conventional planning instruments?

Fear and vulnerability in public space

In this context, gender is not an individual trait, but an analytical lens through which we can understand how social and cultural norms shape urban experience. The production of urban space is deeply intertwined with the social construction of bodies and subjectivities – and this intersection gives rise to a particular experience of vulnerability (Crenshaw, 1991). It’s not just about concrete risks or objectively dangerous situations, but about an internalized sense of inadequacy and insecurity that shapes daily routines and life choices.

This internalization of fear and vulnerability translates into everyday strategies that limit the ability to fully inhabit urban space. Avoiding certain streets, staying in at night, dressing in ways perceived as ‘neutral’, or giving up experiences out of fear of harassment or violence – these acts of self-protection often reinforce the very sense of danger they aim to counter. At the same time, they feed into a narrative of urban space as inherently unwelcoming to those perceived as vulnerable.

Such practices end up producing an emotional geography of the city – a mental map made of safe zones and no-go areas – that doesn’t necessarily align with any objective assessment of risk, but instead reflects a culturally constructed idea of danger (Valentine, 1989).

Within this dynamic, the responsibility for safety is shifted onto individual behaviour, while the structural conditions that generate insecurity remain largely invisible and unchanged. The focus on personal precautions and individual actions obscures the systemic nature of the problem, redirecting the conversation toward blaming or holding accountable those who experience discrimination and violence – rather than questioning the spatial and social arrangements that produce such conditions. As one study notes: “Mothers’ and fathers’ fears limit children’s lives and impose rules and regulations upon them to keep them safe. It is impossible to estimate the psychological effect of this ‘hypervigilance’ on children. Girls especially are warned against sexual molestation, against talking to strangers” (Madriz, 1997, 55).

Fear, then, is not simply a subjective feeling: it functions as a tool of power, shaping how space is used and reinforcing existing social hierarchies. The attribution of fragility and vulnerability to certain bodies – particularly those that are female or non-conforming to gender norms – is not merely a perception, but a deeply embedded social construct, rooted in cultural and institutional models. Fragility is far from being a biological fact; it is produced through processes of exclusion and marginalization that strip individuals of the material and symbolic resources needed to inhabit space with comfort and legitimacy.

Care as a collective practice

In this context, care is not a private or individual act, but a collective practice and a “political paradigm” (Andreola & Muzzonigro, 2024b, 64). To speak of care is to acknowledge that cities are sustained by a dense web of relationships, mutual attentiveness, and both material and symbolic exchanges that make everyday life possible. Traditional urban planning has systematically overlooked this relational dimension, favouring a vision of the city as a space for production and consumption.

Yet without care, there can be no liveable urban space: care for relationships, for infrastructure, for shared resources is what makes dwelling possible.

The emergence of collective practices of care – such as women’s support networks, consciousness-raising groups, participatory and self-organized initiatives – demonstrates that alternative ways of inhabiting and moving through the city are not only imaginable, but already underway. These practices challenge the idea of fragmented, individualized responsibility and instead propose forms of collective agency that reposition those rendered vulnerable as active agents in urban transformation.

In this framework, consciousness-raising takes on a central role. It is not a purely introspective process, but rather a tool for collective analysis of the material and symbolic conditions that constrain action. By bringing to light and sharing everyday experiences, it becomes possible to deconstruct internalized narratives around vulnerability and guilt, and to cultivate new practices of presence in public space (Lonzi, 1978). Consciousness-raising thus becomes a process that bridges the personal and the political, revealing the connections between individual experience and broader systems of oppression (Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, 1977).

The creation of alliances and support networks is not only a strategy of resistance, but a condition for the possibility of inhabiting the city. Mutual care, the sharing of resources, and participation in decision-making processes are not secondary aspects or accessories to urban life, but rather core elements of a collective practice of transformation. These practices make visible the needs and desires often excluded from official planning, and propose concrete alternatives to the exclusionary and competitive logics that still characterize many urban contexts.

Building alliances and support networks goes beyond informal solidarity: it entails a radical rethinking of social relations, urban priorities, and modes of participation. Collective practices of care and resistance are grounded in the awareness that transforming urban space cannot be separated from transforming the social relations and hierarchies that shape it.

Recognizing care as a fundamental infrastructure of the city allows us to interrogate urban

policies in terms of access, equity, and redistribution. Informal support networks, consciousness-raising groups, and grassroots participatory experiences act as laboratories of experimentation that challenge the exclusive authority of experts and institutions, and offer models of shared decision-making and collective spatial production. These experiences are not only acts of resistance but also forms of situated knowledge production. The ability to name and analyse one's everyday experiences, to expose the dimensions of exclusion and marginalization embedded in urban life, becomes a tool for agency. This situated knowledge, produced through dialogue and collective reflection, constitutes a concrete alternative to the technical and universalizing knowledge that has historically dominated planning practices.

Building networks and alliances, however, is not free of tensions and conflicts. The diversity of experiences and political positions requires an ongoing process of negotiation, listening, and redefinition of relationships. Yet it is precisely this open-ended, processual nature that makes collective practices a powerful resource for transformation. The encounter between different subjectivities enables a more complex and nuanced vision of urban space, and the development of intervention strategies capable of addressing diverse and interconnected needs.

Participation as a tool

Participation, in this light, cannot be reduced to mere consultation or to a tool for legitimizing pre-made decisions. It must instead be understood as a process of co-construction of space (Gutiérrez Valdivia & Ortiz Escalante, 2024). Meaningful participation requires time, adequate resources, and recognition of the value of the knowledge and experiences that emerge from below. It also demands critical attention to the power dynamics within participatory groups, to ensure that collaborative practices do not end up reproducing the very hierarchies and exclusionary logics they seek to challenge.

Practices of collective care and consciousness-raising are not simply tools to improve the quality of urban life, but rather embody a radical

critique of the neoliberal and competitive model that dominates contemporary urban agendas (Gutiérrez Valdivia, 2018). Placing care, relationships, and everyday needs at the centre means challenging the logic of the city as a space designed primarily for the market, and asserting a different vision of urbanity: a city that recognizes and values interdependence, supports vulnerable subjectivities, and opens up spaces of possibility and agency.

The work of collectively building networks and transformative practices requires continuous reflection on the material and symbolic conditions in which it unfolds. It is not only a matter of expanding participatory spaces, but of ensuring that these are truly accessible, that the voices of those traditionally excluded are heard and translated into concrete action. Participation must be recognized as a form of social and political labour, and supported accordingly through appropriate resources and recognition.

To rethink the city through the lens of gender, care, and interdependence means addressing the issue of inequality as a central concern of urban justice. As Ana Falú argues, "Despite the progress achieved, cities and their public spheres – economic, political, cultural – remain more unequal for women, a condition that worsens when variables such as race, ethnicity, and class intersect" (2014, 16). In this sense, it is essential to acknowledge that public space is traversed by power relations – relations that can be made visible, contested, and transformed through collective practices of awareness and care.

Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, it is crucial to recognize the political value of everyday practices, from domestic organization to informal support networks, as essential tools in the construction of more just, more accessible, and more liveable cities.

If rethinking urban space through the lens of care and situated experience requires a paradigm shift, it becomes essential to interrogate how such perspectives might be enacted in practice. Certain cultural and artistic practices offer tools to render inequalities visible and to construct collective spaces of awareness and transformation. In this

context, the work of Collettivo Amigdala serves as a compelling example of how art, research, and participation can converge into analytical and interventionist frameworks that translate situated knowledge into collective action. Amigdala's work intertwines artistic practice, urban transformation, and direct involvement of local communities (Manzini, 2019). Through cultural and artistic projects developed in areas undergoing urban change – and aimed at fostering a collective and critical awareness – communities take part in the creative process. This takes place through participatory co-design pathways in which involvement is active at every stage. These processes enable each member to express themselves and enhance their skills and competencies, fostering an empowering dynamic of shared making and collective collaboration (Appadurai, 2013).

Collettivo Amigdala and the *TransFemina* Local Laboratory

Founded in 2005, Collettivo Amigdala is a cultural organization that explores the city as a relational and physical organism – constantly transforming, perpetually in flux – through artistic and cultural projects.¹⁷ By engaging residents directly, urban dynamics are reframed as a field of inquiry, filtered through the 'otherness' of art and the transformative imaginaries that emerge from collective sharing (Tagliacucchi, 2017). For Amigdala, the city is not limited to its physical dimension but is shaped by the ongoing interplay of human relationships as integral to dialogue with the built environment. In this framework, the notion of 'collective' expands to encompass social, political, creative, and ultimately *productive* dimensions (Manzini, 2019).

The European project *TransFemina*¹⁸ enabled Collettivo Amigdala to deepen its research on the city through a gendered lens, posing the questions: “*How much space – material and immaterial – do individuals occupy in their city? How might cities become more transfeminist?*” These questions resist singular answers, as the recognition of care and interdependence as foundational to urban space inevitably alters design logics and evaluative tools.

TransFemina – Intersectional Landscapes, a two-year project supported by Creative Europe, involves partners PELE (Porto, PT), Collettivo Amigdala (Modena, IT), and Col·lectiu Punt 6 (Barcelona, ES). Its goal is to amplify the visibility of feminist narratives in public space and cultural heritage across three Southern European cities – Barcelona, Modena, and Porto – while promoting social cohesion and gender-inclusive urban policies. The project addresses inequalities rooted in racialized social constructs by focusing on underrepresented women, non-binary people, and marginalized identities. Through creative interventions, it aims to co-create alternative narratives and collective reclamations of public space, fostering innovative policies that bridge urban, social, and cultural dimensions.

Amigdala's exploration of evaluative tools for gendered urban space began in 2021 during *Periferico* (Rocchi & Tagliacucchi, 2017), an international performance art festival organized in Modena. The campaign “*Reclaim / Reclaim Your Voice*”¹⁹ – created by the transfeminist street poster collective CHEAP (Bologna) – prompted critical reflections on Modena's urban conditions. A public assembly followed, inviting local groups, associations, and informal networks working on gender issues to articulate demands for the *right to the city*. These discussions exposed the tensions between situated everyday knowledge and

17 Cf. Collettivo Amigdala (2025). *Amigdala Handbook. Accordi, valori, metodi./Agreements-values-methods*. Retrieved June 26, 2025, from <https://handbook.collettivoamigdala.com/accordi-valori-metodi.-lhandbook-di-amigdala/agreements-values-methods-eng>

18 Cf. *TransFemina: Intersectional Landscapes* (2024). Retrieved June 26, 2025, from <https://www.transfemina.org/>

19 Cf. Collettivo Amigdala (2021). *Periferico 2021 – Interventi: CHEAP – Reclaim*. Retrieved June 26, 2025, from <https://collettivoamigdala.com/portfolio-page/periferico-2021/#-1632412301379-648f3740-c7de>



Figure 1. Poster from Collettivo Cheap's "Reclaim my city" poster art campaign (Photo by Elia Mazzotti Gentili)

institutional blind spots regarding spatial justice, particularly in design and planning. Participants called for community-responsive approaches that move beyond outdated 20th-century metrics, advocating instead for shared, experiential forms of participation (Fig. 1).

This demand was further explored in *Periferico*'s 2023 edition through artist Valentina Medda's *Modena by Night* project.²⁰ Medda's performance focused on nocturnal urban elements and their impact on women (or those socialized as such),

mapping how fear alters their routes and rhythms. The performance involved 13 female or femme-identifying participants in a two-phase process: a collective analysis workshop, followed by individual night walks. During the workshop, participants collectively reflected on their perceptions and fears regarding nighttime urban mobility. Each individual contributed with personal tactics and strategies for "surviving nocturnal walks" – practices emerging from a social construct shaped by lived experiences and familial socialization (Fig. 2).

The collective exchange revealed the conditioning and self-imposed restrictions that individuals socialized as women (within the studied context) enact while navigating the city, particularly after dark. These "survival mechanisms" often remain

²⁰ Cf. Collettivo Amigdala (2023). *Periferico 2023 - Valentina Medda - Modena By Night*. Retrieved June 26, 2025, from <https://collettivoamigdala.com/2023/09/valentina-medda/>



Figure 2. *Modena by Night* performance (Photo by Davide Piferi De Simoni)

invisible when examined in isolation, so deeply are they embedded in daily routines. It is through shared narration that the recursivity and commonality of such experiences become legible, demonstrating their nature not as individual idiosyncrasies but as systemic practices shared by most femme-socialized individuals.

The collective awareness that emerged served as the primary component in defining shared tools for critical assessment and interpretation of the city. These tools evolved from observation to representation, transforming individual experience into cartographic agency. Vulnerabilities and insecurities experienced by participants were inscribed on the urban map as erased zones, marked in black to signify areas avoided or deemed

off-limits. Each participant contributed to the map by blotting out parts of the city they feared to traverse, thereby establishing a new evaluative system, alternative geographies, and a transformed urban morphology. This process did not merely record fear; it materialized the invisible infrastructures of vulnerability, making them legible and thus contestable (Fig. 3).

The new form of the city resulting from this collective mapping elevated shared experiences beyond mere testimony, framing them as qualitative instruments for assessing urban conditions. These evaluations are not absolute but fluid and perception-dependent – yet deeply political in their capacity to challenge dominant narratives of safety and space. Precisely because they emerge

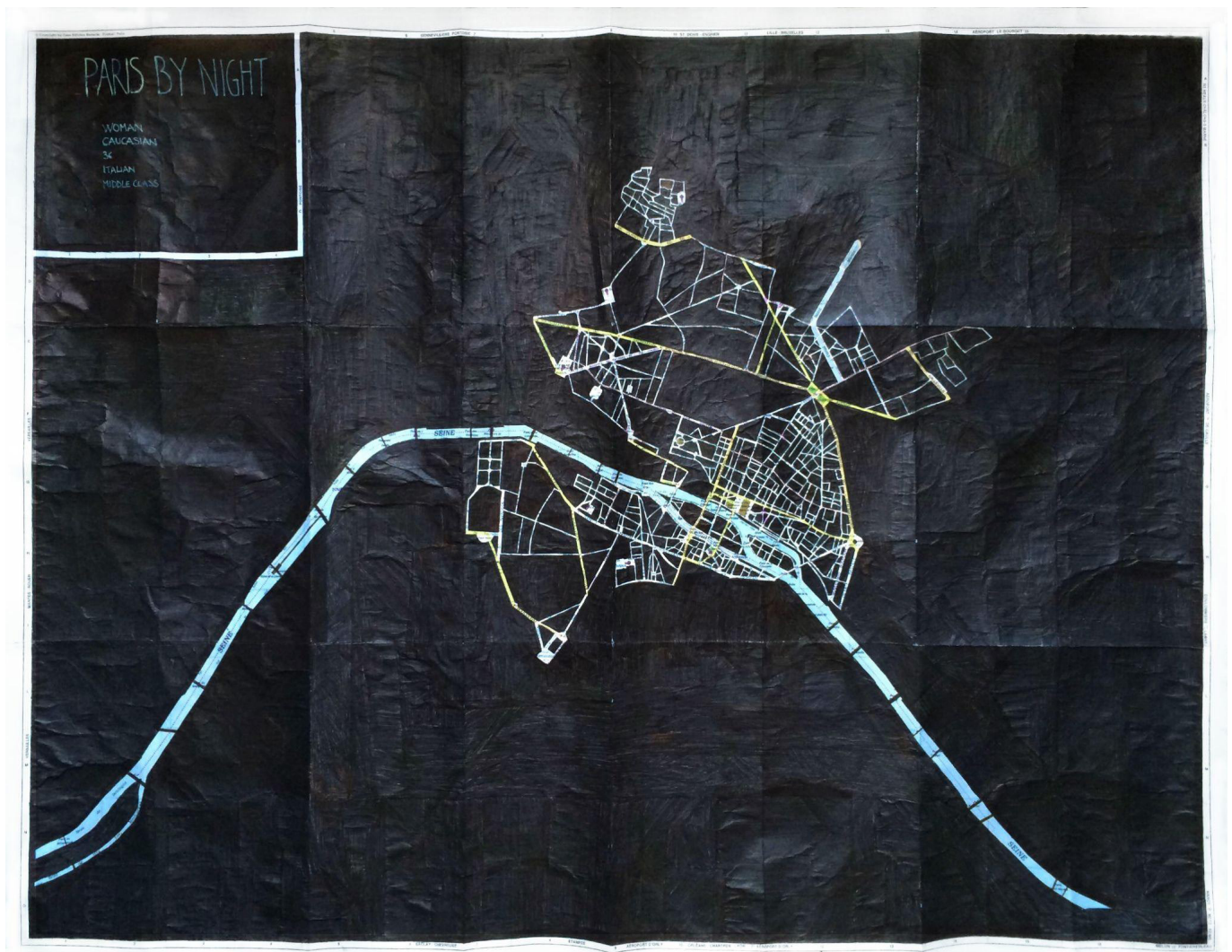


Figure 3. Valentina Medda, *Cities by Night_Paris*, 2013, ink intervention on a city map.

from specific individuals or groups, their strength lies in the recognition of their particularity. This approach proves valuable for urban design, as it enables the development of replicable tools and frameworks for future assessments.

Within the *TransFemina* framework, the reflection expanded to encompass the broader discourse on gender inequalities in urban environments, focusing particularly on the visibility of feminist narratives (often rendered invisible) and on public space accessibility for women and gender minorities. Guided precisely by this situated

and embodied approach, the Local Laboratories constitute the core artistic activity of the *TransFemina* project, representing crucial spaces for co-creation and critical reflection on gender inequalities in public space. These workshops, conducted respectively in the three partner cities – Porto, Modena, and Barcelona – were specifically designed to adapt to each local context while responding to the particular needs of their communities, employing ethnographic, exploratory, and creative methodologies. Conceived as safe and welcoming spaces, the workshops aimed to raise

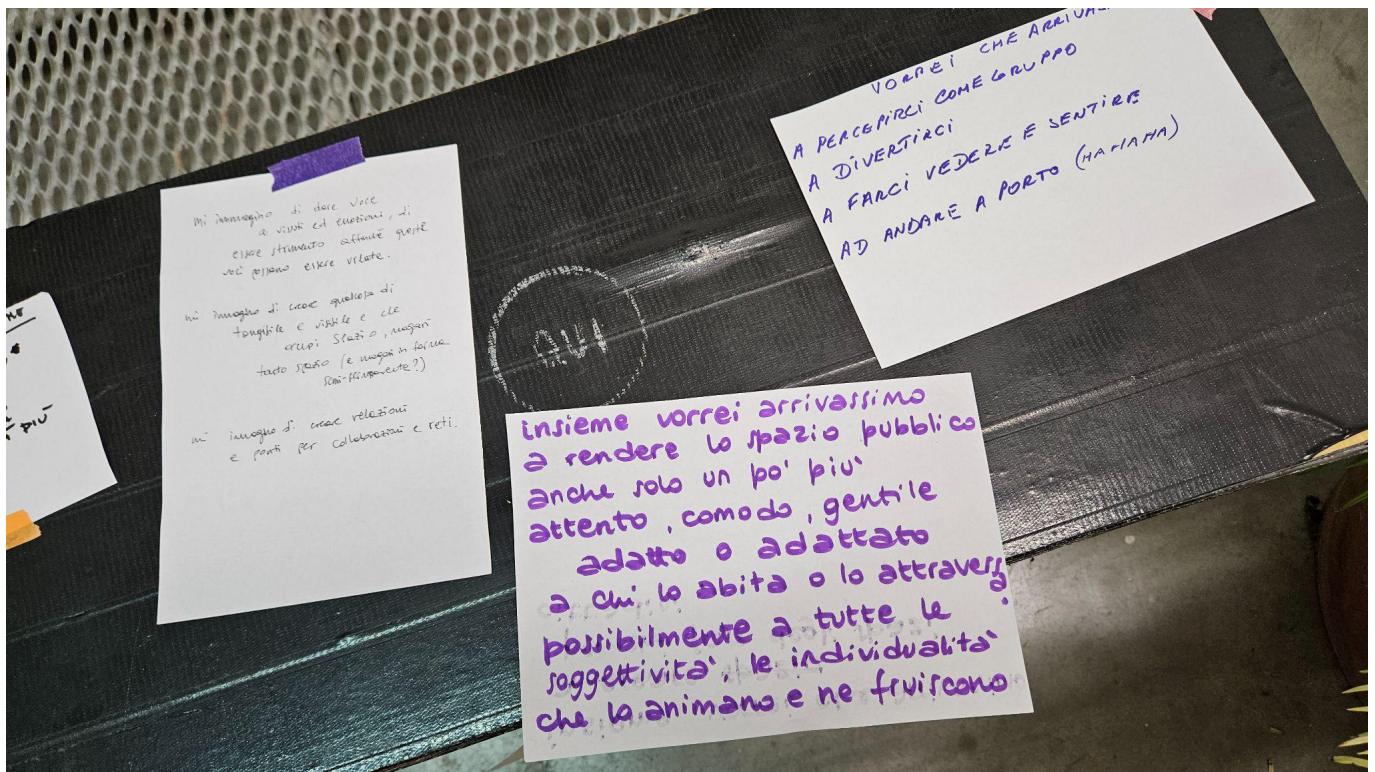


Figure 4. Feedback comments from participants at the end of the workshop (Photo by Federica Rocchi)

community awareness regarding issues of safety and bodily legitimacy in public space. Within this context, the project addressed the symbolic and tangible transformation of spaces while fostering the development of new theoretical and practical frameworks for urban planning – frameworks grounded in the needs that emerged through workshop experimentation.

The local laboratories were conceptualized as dynamic and adaptable spaces. Each workshop carefully considered the cultural and social specificities of its context, striving to achieve broader representativeness through in-depth analysis of needs and issues. In this way, the workshops became platforms for dialogue between diverse experiences and subjectivities, creating mutual support networks intended to endure beyond the project's formal conclusion.

In the Modena laboratory, the primary objective was to stimulate a critical perspective towards the city within the group. This was done by engaging

with both the experiential dimension (sensations, emotions, and memories) and the representational dimension (political, cultural, value-based meanings) of places and, more specifically, of the architectural elements that shape the city. The concept of relationship was explored at multiple levels – termed “thicknesses”²¹ following Gilles Clément’s framework (2014) – : from individual bodily awareness and sensory perception of context to group dynamics involving the transmission of experiences and information as collective contributions. The workshop further examined verbal relationality in experience-sharing and non-verbal relationality in collective movement through space as a unified body. Acknowledging that a city is not only its tangible, physical dimension but also its intangible,

²¹ A line in a representation is not just a two-dimensional mark; in reality, it possesses its own depth, a thickness: every layer corresponds to a different interpretation of the same context.



Figure 6. The laboratory participants during one of the urban explorations (Photo by Silvia Tagliacruzchi)

to traverse, as the final outcome of the project's journey (Fig. 6).

The *TransFemina* laboratory in Modena transformed participants into a community of shared practice, where individual differences were both recognized and integrated into a collective body. This relational capacity and scalability, emerging from situated knowledge, offered innovative perspectives for urban design by facilitating dialogue between individual and collective experiences – thereby enriching urban visions while valorising the very differences and contradictions that characterize the city.

Conclusion

The Modena *TransFemina* laboratory demonstrates that participatory and artistic practices can function as empirical tools for analysing and transforming gendered urban experience. Three key findings emerge. First, collective emotional mapping reveals a dual register: it visualises the spatial distribution

of fear while simultaneously generating actionable insights for planning, such as specific street segments, lighting conditions, or urban thresholds requiring intervention. Second, the workshops and performative walks acted as devices of co-production, enabling participants to articulate strategies of navigation and reclaim their right to the city. These processes therefore operate not only as diagnostic tools but also as forms of empowerment. Third, the findings highlight the centrality of care as an urban infrastructure – that is, as a dimension embedded in lighting, services, resting areas, and the material conditions that shape everyday mobility.

The implications for urban planning and policy are concrete: municipalities could incorporate emotional mapping and qualitative diagnosis into planning procedures; allocate resources for longer-term participatory processes; and translate situated knowledge into design actions supported by shared indicators of impact.

Given its qualitative and situated nature, the study does not aim for representativeness but for

depth. Further research could test the replicability of this methodology in different urban contexts and evaluate longer-term changes through mixed methods, including mobility data and before/after assessments of perceived safety.

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