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EDITORIAL

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Reclaiming the City Through Care: Public Urban Cultures of Care

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Abstract

Practices of care are key elements of urbanity and thus of sociospatial relations, including everyday experiences in and of urban places and spaces. However, practices of care become even more important in times of multiple societal crises in which the quality of life of individuals and communities is significantly under stress. This thematic issue presents state-of-the-art research from urban contexts including Barcelona, Berlin, Bern, Bogotá, Brussels, Cologne, Copenhagen, Eindhoven, Florence, Hamburg, Helsinki, Graz, Ljubljana, Madrid, Munich, and Rotterdam, as well as critical reflections on the British context and comparative approaches between Austria, Hungary, and the Netherlands. The editorial introduces urban cultures of care and how they take place in space, how cultures of care produce urban space, and how cultures of care empower people and places.

Keywords

caring communities; declining welfare; European cities; social infrastructures; sociospatial relations; urban everyday life

1. Introduction

> Urban researchers have expanded ideas of the sustainable city, the resilient city, the smart city, the creative city, the just city and the sharing city. Why not the caring city? (Power & Williams, 2020, p. 8)

For well over a decade, urban everyday life has been framed by entrepreneurial urbanization, self-responsibilization, and by neoliberal austerity policies that affect ordinary caring practices in both private and public contexts (Gabauer et al., 2022; Hall, 2019, 2022; Theodore, 2020). However, practices of care are not only related to people's genuine precariousness (Butler, 2012) and individual survival connected

to basic needs (Federici, 2020); they are also key elements of urbanity and thus of sociospatial relations. Beyond private homes and institutionalized caring relations in retirement homes, hospitals, kindergartens, etc., various caring practices make up a city and its spaces, often linked to social infrastructures. The latter:

> Include services related to care for children and the elderly, health, and education but also the provision of social housing, food, and energy and mobility infrastructures. *Informal* social infrastructures refer to non-institutional and/or self-organized care of people in precarious positions, such as single parents, refugees, the homeless, or unemployed people. (Breinbauer et al., 2024, p. 12; emphasis added)

In periods of multiple societal crises, the quality of life of individuals and communities is significantly under stress. In comparison with less privileged regions of the world, European cities are also under pressure to maintain quality of life, whether these be robust, declining, or even post-welfare states. Despite the heterogeneity of European cities in terms of sociodemographic, cultural, and economic characteristics, the majority are currently struggling with challenges posed by housing shortage, limitations in healthcare and care services, biodiversity loss, heat, eroding democracy, precariousness by artificial intelligence, etc. Crises are political as they manifest unequal access to resources. To take but one crisis as an illustration for its cross-sectoral relations and political dimension, Dan Jørgensen, EU Commissioner for Energy and Housing, states in his speech on "Addressing the Housing Crisis in the Union" (2025, p. 3):

> Today, we are in the house of European democracy. But the foundations of this house are rooted in homes across Europe. And if these homes are not stable or secure, then neither is our democracy. So let's work together: to deliver affordable, sustainable, and decent housing for our citizens [sic]; to support the people who strengthen our communities—the teachers and the nurses; the police officers and the fire fighters.

While the academic discourse on caring cities is vibrant and comprehensive, with a predominant presence in the Spanish-speaking context (Müller et al., 2025), the care crisis "in situ" in public debates is predominantly associated with deficiencies when it comes to urban-related care themes. Both in practice and in academia, urban cultures of care have thus gained a lot of attention—and this thematic issue is an outcome of this attention. Caring communities respond to unequal access to numerous resources, such as institutions dedicated to healthcare and education and those related to basic needs such as food (Abram et al., 2025; Verwey & Saltiel, 2025), public green spaces and their role for public health beyond humans (Bankovska & Lukasik, 2025; de la Fuente & Cobos, 2025; Velkavrh et al., 2025), shelter, and conviviality (Botha et al., 2025; Dikmans et al., 2025; Felder, 2025). Unequal access is yet based on intersectional inequalities and linked to urban power geometries influencing how and where people are able to care for oneself and one another. The articles in this thematic issue are critical of uneven power geometries precisely because of differing local contexts and welfare state characteristics (Fröhlich et al., 2025; Lehtonen & Jupp, 2025; McAndrew et al., 2025). At the same time, they look for ways to collectively empower people (Bertram et al., 2025) and to enable socio-political democratization (Tronto, 2013). As such, we claim that caring communities as an element of public urban cultures of care are political and politicized by various (non-)caring actors.

However, caring communities do not simply take place in various spaces. They also produce "care-full" places (Williams, 2017) and spaces of mutual care and contribute to what we will outline below as a caring urbanism

in a normative sense. Cultures of care are linked to what is currently discussed as alternative, informal, shadow, or social infrastructures of care (see Section 3; see Dikmans et al., 2025) and contribute to a more bearable everyday life in general and particularly in times of severe stress, e.g., as experienced during the pandemic lockdowns 2020/21 and the extended summer heatwaves in recent years (Fritz & Krasny, 2019; Jupp, 2022; Saltiel & Strüver, 2022).

Next to place-based social infrastructures of care we would like to emphasize caring infrastructures in the sense that caring communities can result in formal and informal cultures of care (Breinbauer et al., 2024; Greenhough et al., 2022; Raghuram, 2016) and include often invisible caring practices which aim to enable people to care for themselves and others in satisfactory manners. In our view, caring practices carry potential to create urban cultures of care with high social and spatial visibility due to spatial and social proximity in a densely built environment that might differ from peripheral or rural areas (Stenbacka, 2025). Thus, opportunities emerge not only for social interaction, but also for solidaristic socialities (e.g., Dowling, 2018; Hall, 2019, 2020; Power et al., 2022; Power & Williams, 2020).

Against this backdrop, we would like to use this brief editorial to introduce and reflect on how urban cultures of care take place in space (Section 2), how cultures of care produce urban space (Section 3), and how cultures of care empower people and places (outlook in Section 4). We hope that the carefully selected contributions in this thematic issue will contribute to an empowering debate across social sciences and spatial disciplines.

2. Cultures of Care Take Place in Urban Spaces

We argue in this thematic issue that places and (social) spaces are deeply rooted in their emergence from unequal spatial components ("where"), individual and collective basic needs ("what") arising in interdependencies among people ("who") and their (non-)supporting networks or (non-)existing alliances ("why") to fulfil these needs. Since social and political negotiation processes are characterized by long durée, individuals and collectives often respond more quickly to specific immediate needs (in the urban) such as creating access to open spaces for recreation in densely built neighbourhoods or turning food donations into nourishing meals. They care about social deficits and they re-act with (short-term) interventions or (long-term) activities that become visible in urban spaces.

However, there are subtle differences in caring practices and not all of these can be classified easily as non-commercial provided by individuals as neighbourly support activities (e.g., Botha et al., 2025), by civil society as an alliance for equal rights (e.g., de la Fuente & Cobos, 2025), or by public institutions catering to public interests (e.g., Velkavrh et al., 2025). Garden fences that donate hygiene products or open book shelves might emerge from bottom-up community initiatives, but they can also be co-opted or even "strategically" implemented by local governments to enable social interactions, for instance, as an element within urban renewal processes. These examples identify the ambivalence of motivations in caretaking in urban spaces.

From a more spatial perspective, activities such as community-organized flea markets support the revitalization of neglected urban places such as courtyards or streetscapes. In addition, community flea markets are important resources for households with limited means to gain access to affordable goods such as clothes or furniture. Nevertheless, they also commercialize urban spaces and use an economic practice

(selling/buying/trading) as a vehicle to create floating contacts and a sense of community belonging. Other practices of care follow explicit entrepreneurial economic interests by co-opting collective ambitions, for instance preventing food waste. Web-based applications such as https://www.toogoodtogo.com are profit-driven, while community-based places such as food fridges and shelves share food with others at no cost. Charitable responsibilities and convictions are thus also part of cultures of care in urban spaces. They range from collection boxes for clothes to the reuse of vacant spaces, such as former shop spaces, which are used to offer support in everyday life and for knowledge exchange. Arrival infrastructures, such as centres and shelters for refugees and forced migrants in immediate need during the long summer of migration, made cultures of care very visible in many European city centres (Saltiel, 2020), despite their precariousness and temporality.

To conclude on the varieties of places and spaces as an integral part of caring infrastructures, we follow the claim by Gabauer et al. (2022) to critically reflect on the reason why certain caring practices emerge at all. By doing so, foodbanks or social (food) markets, for instance, might be seen as the result of neoliberal politics and policies—rather than of solidarity-based caring practices contributing to an urban culture of care.

3. Cultures of Care Produce Urban Space

It is a truism that spaces and places—whether they are caring or not—are the outcome of social relations (Massey, 1994) and thus depend on people and their interactive social and spatial practices. But how can places become effects of caring communities and how are they linked to various kinds of caring activities and social infrastructures of care? A bookshelf or a provisional shelter is not a caring place as such.

Departing from celebratory discourses on social infrastructures as shared public and semi-private places of encounter with civic capacities for sociability and social ties (Amin, 2006, 2008, 2014; Klinenberg, 2018; Latham & Layton, 2019, 2022), we would like to advance a critical view on social infrastructures of care that is sensitive to intersectional power relations unfolding in and shaping urban spaces (Billingham et al., 2024; Horton & Penny, 2023; Traill et al., 2024). Being attentive to gendered and classed differences as well as to racialized and minoritized populations makes it obvious that—and in which ways—social infrastructures are unequally distributed and accessible, context-dependent, and contested through their use by different people. Foodbanks, soup kitchens, social clinics, public green spaces, multi-use playgrounds, for example, are not inherently "good" for all people and in all neighbourhoods alike. They can turn out to be spaces of enclosure, advance deprivation or gentrification, increase inequalities and exclusion, and tend to fix local effects of neoliberal urbanism only temporarily and/or partially.

At the same time, social infrastructures have of course become "essential networks of social reproduction and survival" (Horton & Penny, 2023, p. 1713) in times of neoliberal restructuring. We thus need to be sensitive to how social infrastructures are embedded in local power geometries on the one hand and how they are brought to life by caring labour and social reproduction which enable encounter, mutual concern, and caring-with in Joan Tronto's sense on the other (Hall, 2020; Jupp, 2022; Tronto, 2013). Caring-with refers to communal practices of solidarity beyond intimate caring relations and care work and therefore comprises immaterial as well as material structures and spaces of care.

Caught between the material and the immaterial, Jennie Middleton and Farhan Samanani (2022, p. 781) caution that "we risk paying more attention to highways and community centres then we do to the ways in which black American women, for example, have shared ways of making 'homeplaces' for generations that provide collective means of refuge, endurance, and dignity." The latter refer to what Power et al. (2022, p. 1172) have described as "shadow infrastructures," as "networks and practices through which people living in poverty sustain life" and this is of particular importance in the sense of solidarity and cultures of care in post-welfare cities. Care, in this framing, is obviously neither a private issue nor a female virtue—although it is too often linked to femininity and has been made invisible and naturalized as "women's work" for centuries (Federici, 2020; see Barbagallo & Federici, 2012, for similar associations of care work with colonialism and migration).

The latter indicates that care work and caring infrastructures are embodied, relational, and "peopled" (Sheringham, 2025, p. 276). But people as (caring) infrastructures is very ambivalent, first, because when people are infrastructured, the number of people who (can) take responsibility is diminishing (Hall, 2020; Simone, 2021). Second, because they often rely on unpaid work to enable encounter and social relationships (Hall, 2020). Taking into account the tradition of feminized and racialized care work, there is the danger that gendered, racialized, and also classed bodies become infrastructured. Yet, the notion of "people as infrastructure" by AbdouMaliq Simone (2004, 2021) was intended to resituate urban existence in various African cities, including "the inheritance of resourced realities" (2021, p. 1343). Over the past 20 years, the concept has travelled to the Global North, and in Europe it has gained importance in the context of people's precarities in declining welfare states.

Against this backdrop, Sarah Marie Hall (2020; see also 2019, 2022) has pointed out that the term social infrastructure has become popular in tandem with neoliberal cuts to public services. However, she criticizes the above-mentioned "celebratory discourses on social infrastructures" for their allegedly excessive influence of physical spaces as enablers or shapers of social relations—resulting in social infrastructures as "side-effects" of physical ones. And while Hall welcomes the idea of "people as infrastructure," she also stresses that the labour social and caring relationships are built on is, again, often invisible or ignored. In light of this, she claims: "Social reproduction is thus itself an infrastructure upon which to build societies and economies—a complex network of people, practices and politics, labour, love and life" (Hall, 2020, p. 89).

4. Outlook: How to Achieve Urban Cultures of Care?

Although we acknowledge a difference between social (material) infrastructures and caring infrastructures provided by people's labour, we do not intend to elaborate further on this here, but rather shift our focus to a threefold outlook. Against the background that care comprises "an ethic, a relation, a form of labor, an element of cultural [and social] reproduction, and a building-bloc towards non-capitalist and non-dominative social relations" (Woodly et al., 2021, p. 892), including collective care and caring-with as forms of placemaking and as "prefigurative politics for building a world in which all people can live and thrive" (Woodly et al., 2021, p. 891), we see the need to stress some lacunae:

- Alternative infrastructures of care can repair the social fabric of society (Jupp, 2022; Traill et al., 2024), but too often, "repair" is a care fix only, not touching the underlying causes (sometimes even reproducing them). When dealing with alternative infrastructures of care, which have the potential to

produce new caring relations, we need to take seriously the notions of caring-with (instead of caring-for), of solidarity instead of charity. Care in this sense is more than repair, it relies on and consolidates those interdependent structures that sustain life and that turn physical places into care-full spaces as parts of public urban cultures of care.

- Care-discourses have been criticized for their Eurocentrism and Anthropocentrism—for focusing on structures emerging from the global North and for privileging a focus on human relations of care. Although the articles in this issue focus on cities in Europe only, they rely on, for example, travelling theories such as Simone's notion of "people as infrastructure." Moreover, including more-than-human perspectives and worlds is also rare in this issue, despite Puig de la Bellacasa's seminal book *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (2017) and broader calls to de-center Eurocentric and Anthropocentric frameworks (Power & Williams, 2020; Sheringham, 2025; Silberzahn, 2024; Woodly et al., 2021).
- The pathways to realize cultures of care involve at least two additional perspectives: The (im-)possibilities of urban planning and of academic research. In the context of planning disciplines, practitioners and decision-makers operating within politicized realms including zoning, (building) permissions, and distribution of resources seem to follow a tendency to "fix spaces" through planning and architecture. Usually, this is understood to enhance "problematic places" and to repair or to signify the revitalization of neglected spaces through construction, architecture, and (landscape) design, but also through the implementation of social measures. While this thematic issue notably demonstrates sympathy, particularly in advocating for social activities and community-oriented initiatives that foster caring environments for all humans and also for more-than-human life, it is important to acknowledge the inherent limitations of such efforts in the absence of a focus on socio-political democratization (Tronto, 2013). Caring communities are more than bottom-up initiatives provided by caring people; they need more than access to rooms, funding, or permissions by authorities. If caring communities are acknowledged by urban planning as an integral element of public urban cultures of care that maintain the living quality of everyday life in cities, they are also political. As such, they hold a right to power within planning processes in their attempts to reduce sociospatial disparities and maybe even to advance a caring urbanism in a normative sense.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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