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Caring Cities: An Introduction

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In their introduction to the Caring Cities dossier, Linda Kopitz and Pei-Sze Chow consider how care intersects with the urban, and how care might be “designed,” through the lenses of technology, politics, and the senses.

[Ed. note: this is the introduction to a dossier on [Caring Cities](#).]

RECENT POSTS

*The world will look different if we move care from its current peripheral location to a place near the center of human life.*¹

The foundational manifesto written by Joan Tronto draws an implicit connection between care and place in its emphasis on shifting care from the (symbolic) periphery to the center. In this dossier, we take these spatial metaphors literally, and aim to highlight the intersections between care and the city. The authors featured in this dossier cover a breadth of care geographies in global cities such as Amsterdam, Beijing, Malmö, Melbourne, Seoul, Singapore, and Venice. Rather than functioning as individual case studies, the specific articulations of urban imaginations and practices in and through these cities function as entry points into a critical exploration of different dimensions of care in urban settings. What connects the nine articles is the question of how care, as a concept and practice, intersects with the urban through technological, sensorial, and political lenses.

Of course, considerations of care – for individual bodies, larger communities, as well as natural environments – have always functioned as an undercurrent in architectural planning. From the apartment that serves as a shelter for the human body to the warehouse that protects and guards industrial production, various notions of caring for something or someone are implicit in the design of urban edifices. However, the more recent discursive emphasis on “care” within neoliberal capitalist contexts highlights how care can also be strategically deployed to frame urban interventions independent of their actual care for the human and more-than-human inhabitants of the city.

This dossier takes as its starting point the notion of *care* as “our individual and common ability to provide the political, social, material and emotional conditions”² for a more sustainable, connected, and caring world. Is “care” always “connected”? Connected takes on a consciously double meaning here. What we attempt to foreground in this collection of essays is the importance of a materialist approach in understanding this connectivity, from thinking of care as a concept to grounding practices of care spatially and situating care in relation to the human and more-than-human entities that enable its production. Further, the role of technology in such urban care

1. Piazza Navona's Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow: Cinema, Peirce, Lynch, and the Dynamicality of Spatial Perception

2. Bollywood's Blockbusters: The Rise of the Indian Multiplex Theater and its Impacts

3. Temporal Possibilities of Set Design and Architecture in Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle*

4. From a Derelict Mansion to the Malibu Coast: Film Noir, Urban Spaces, and the Articulation of Gender Identity in Los Angeles

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interventions cannot be understated, considering the highly developed forms of digitisation that undergird urban society, politics, and infrastructure.

We are interested in exploring care as something that can be “designed” – and situated in design. “Smart” cities, “connected” cities, “sustainable” cities, “cognitive” cities: these urban imaginaries are deeply entangled with ideas and promises of technology that promise to care for human and more-than-human inhabitants and the world at large, to improve our individual and collective wellbeing, and to offer answers to the challenges of climate change. Such techno-optimistic ideologies seek to position the human at the center of the design process, while simultaneously emphasizing technological innovation as essential means to achieve “care.” In doing so, this dossier not only explores how (audio)visual representations construct but also challenge urban imaginaries in and through historical dimensions. Foregrounding the neoliberal and capitalist undercurrents that drive the imagination, design and construction of cities as more sustainable, more healthy and more caring also functions as a starting point for a critique.

The key image used for this introduction, created by the generative artificial intelligence program *Midjourney* as a response to the prompt “imagine Amsterdam as a caring and sustainable city”, points to our specific interest in the entanglement between technology and care in the urban. Approaching care as concept, practice and method, the articles in this dossier are divided across three thematic sections: Mediating Care through Technology, Sensing Care in the City, and Embodying Care and Neoliberal Urbanity. As with the key image, we have used artificial intelligence programs to visualize the key terms linking the articles in these three sections together. “New visionary imaginaries of the urban that illustrate a significant diversity of ideas are few,” concludes Nick Dunn in his overview of urban imaginaries in fiction.³ As generative programs draw on expansive databases of existing images in their creation of “new” visions, the repetition of cultural imaginaries of the city as more connected to be considered more “caring” become striking in our creative (if small scale) intervention. These images do not offer a hyperrealistic, photographic representation of future cities, but rather draw on

material and haptic practices of architectural drawing. This, in turn, functions as an affective counterpoint to the digital imagination and mediation of sustainable cities as “connected” cities. From caring for the environment through digital maps to caring for urban bodies through public fitness equipment, from technologically mediating happiness to walking as a form of urban self-care, this dossier highlights how care as a discourse and practice balances the fine line between alternative visions of urbanity and “carewashing” — branding strategies that attempt to increase profit via the commodification of care.

Mediating Care through Technology

Big data, artificial intelligence and digital tools are deployed in both utopian and dystopian imaginations of urban futures. In current architectural projects like Saudi Arabia’s *The Line* in NEOM and South Korea’s *Eco Delta Smart Village* and contemporary science fiction films that reimagine caring urban futures, questions of sustainability, technology, and care become almost indistinguishable from each other. The first three articles in this dossier point to the intersection between care and technology, and challenge whether caring for infrastructures leads to more (or less) caring spaces and communities. Through a reading of a retrofuturistic science-fiction film about the use of happiness-boosting algorithms to govern inhabitants in a small community in “Care-by-algorithm in *Tiong Bahru Social Club* (2020): Imagining the technification of happiness in Singapore”, Pei-Sze Chow examines the film’s mediation of contemporary discourses behind “smart” algorithms that purport to care for inhabitants’ well-being in the small Asian nation-state. Chow argues that the film offers a cautiously optimistic view of how the “fourthspace” — the digital space where data is power — provides the possibility for individuals to reclaim the means to care for oneself and one’s community within an algocratic state. In “Forever Infrastructures: Memorialization and Care in Australia’s Urban Cemeteries”, Sam Holleran draws on urban cemeteries in Melbourne to discuss how we imagine care and memorialization in the built environment. Caring for the cemetery becomes both an exercise in urban planning and a negotiation between green spaces, community needs and infrastructural necessities. Between historical landmarks and contemporary sites, between undesirable “neighbors”

and coveted green spaces, cemeteries become temporally and spatially ambiguous places. Adding another dimension to the infrastructural dimension of care, “Sensing Nature: Green Databases and Maintenance as/of Care” by Linda Kopitz traces how green databases – like the ones maintained by the municipality of Amsterdam – construct an idea of maintenance as care, and care as maintenance. Mapping, mediating and maintaining urban nature through digital databases complicates the boundary between real and virtual, present and possible environments, and ultimately fragments sustainable and caring practices in the now.

Sensing Care in the City



For this image, we asked Midjourney to include “care” and “self care” in the imagination of urban life.

The second group of three articles in this dossier explores care as not only mediated through technology but also experiences through the senses. By foregrounding the sonic, visual and embodied dimensions of care, the authors draw connections between historical ideas of care and caring spaces (in the form of the “walkable city,” for instance), mediated constructions of spaces between fiction and

reality, and contemporary urban imaginaries. “Sounding Care: Malmö’s Cultural-Industrial Sound Zone” by Lucy Cathcart Frödén consciously pushes against the emphasis on the visual in thinking and mapping alternative routes towards more caring cities. Providing sonic sketches of Malmö at a moment of urban (re)invention this article challenges us to tune in to care – metaphorically and literally – in the city. At the same time, the tension between “desirable” and “undesirable” sounds in the sonic construction of Malmö as a city of culture points to the political dimensions of what – and who – is being cared for. Shifting from the auditory to the embodied, “Walking With and Caring For: Attending to the Self and the Other in the Pedestrian City” by Pedram Dibazar approaches walking through the lens of care in an attempt to reframe walking from a solitary practice to a shared experience. Both necessitating and enabling care, walking together with friends, children or strangers — physically or virtually, interactively or silently — functions as a starting point for sensing the city differently, and paying attention to different ways of navigating “walkable” urban environments. Foregrounding walking as a sensory experience in turn points to the overlapping yet occasionally contradicting dimensions of caring for the self, caring for others and caring for the environment. In “Finding Care in Korea: Korean Media Consumption as Urban Self-Care”, Faye Mercier folds media consumption into the sensory construction of care in the un/familiar city. Drawing on collective ethnography, this article explores how film and television function as a source of comfort and reassurance for avid watchers of K-media for first-time visitors of Korea navigating the foreign city. However, the familiarity with the city through audiovisual media also highlights the tensions between the mediated imagination and the material experience of Seoul. At the same time, these individual practices and sensorial dimensions of care are made possible – or impossible – through the spatial design of the city itself. This where the final three articles in this dossier add another dimension to “Caring Cities.”

Embodying Care and Neoliberal Urbanity



For this image, we added the keywords “care” and “body” to our prompt for the generative artificial program Midjourney.

If we understand “architecture as a condition for care,”⁴ exploring how caring cities are represented, designed and (ultimately) built points us to the complex connections between imagination and practice. At the same time, the discursive and physical construction of the city as a place of and for care necessitates a deeper engagement with the neoliberal underpinnings of happiness and well-being “by design.” In “Doing Good for Disability in Asian Smart Cities?” by Victor Zhuang, Jocelyn Tay, Gerard Goggin, Lee Chei Sian, and Wong Meng Ee, the notion of “doing good” for disabled people in the city through digital technologies serves as a starting point for a critique of the contradictions and problems that run through current attempts to design inclusion into Asian “smart” cities using technology. The authors argue for the need to critically assess existing initiatives that are often neoliberal Global North “impositions” that misunderstand or neglect Asian conceptualisations of smart cities and disability. Laura Vermeeren turns away from a hypermodern vision of Beijing to zoom in on a very specific part of the urban fabric: state-sponsored outdoor fitness machines. In “A

Caring Beijing through Public Fitness Equipment”, Vermeeren links the construction and use of these “senior playgrounds” to a philosophy of self-care and well-being (*Yangsheng*) that is especially pertinent in the context of China’s rapidly aging population. *Yangsheng*, however, cannot be delinked from a capitalist logic where, in exchange for the free use of urban fitness infrastructure, inhabitants are expected to take responsibility for their own bodies and thereby not be a burden on a fragile and overwhelmed healthcare system. With an emphasis on the bodily appearance and a general sense of well-being for city inhabitants, Vincent Baptist argues the visions of the “smooth city” and “wellness city” are important lenses through which to understand the modalities of reciprocal care between the city organism and its population. In “Healthy Cities and Bodies: Reflections on New Paradigms of Urban Well-Being,” Baptist outlines how the two concepts function in modern-day Amsterdam and Venice respectively and suggest that “both tendencies are marked by a heightened sense of urban and personal care, not for each other however, but rather for oneself.”

Tracing the shift of care from periphery to center in the material and immaterial construction of “Caring Cities” teases out the tensions between technology, care, and the urban. Throughout this dossier, we foreground how technology can simultaneously enable and disrupt practices of care, how imagining and experiencing caring infrastructures are fundamentally different dimensions, and how care is discursively and literally built in and into the urban. Through the lens of care, the (urban) world looks very different indeed.

Linda Kopitz

Linda Kopitz has studied at the University of Leipzig, Germany, and the University of Miami, USA, and holds a Research Masters in Media Studies from the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Her PhD research – situated between urban studies and media studies – explores the entanglement between real and virtual environments in sustainable architecture. Connecting her professional experience as a Creative Director with her interdisciplinary academic work, she is currently working as a Lecturer in Cross-Media Culture at the University of Amsterdam, where her main research interests are architectural media, gender and the intersection between technology and imaginations of the everyday.

Pei-Sze Chow

Pei-Sze Chow is Assistant Professor of Media and Culture and Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Amsterdam. She is Director of the AI and Cultural Production research group at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis and co-PI of *Automating Cinema: Technographic Explorations of AI in Film Culture*, where she is researching the impact of AI-powered tools on film labour. Her most recent book is *Transnational Screen Culture in Scandinavia: Mediating Regional Space and Identity in the Oresund Region* (Palgrave, 2021) and she was a recipient of the European Commission's Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship from 2018 to 2020.

Notes

- ↑1 Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- ↑2 The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (London: Verso: 2020).
- ↑3 Nick Dunn, "Urban Imaginaries and the Palimpsest of the Future," in *The Routledge Companion to Urban Imaginaries*, ed. Christoph Lindner and Miriam Meissner (Routledge, 2018), 375.
- ↑4 Elke Krasny, "CARE," *AA Files*, no. 76 (2019): 38–39.

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Artificial intelligence, care, Caring cities, Design, Neoliberalism, Sensory experience, technology

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