RIN♀ EBY- exploring feminist design tools

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We started this thesis driven by a situation we had noticed in an area we felt connected to, with no background in gender studies or knowledge of what a feminist planning or design could look like. Translating the ideal of female empowerment to tangible design propositions has been a constant struggle throughout this project. Through our various explorations we realized that this is a question that needs addressing from multiple angles. Our instinctive response was to make a bold feminist design move; to take away some of the male dominated spaces. This can be seen in our proposal number two, where we suggest to remove the parking lots that are there today. However, we were also aware that this move alone would not come to truly change the dynamics in Rinkeby. Without a supporting replacement targeting women, the norm (aka men’s dominance of public space), would still claim the space. The solution we presented was what can be seen as gesture that shows how women’s needs and issues are prioritized.

We are convinced that this approach alone is not enough. The empiric research we conducted in Rinkeby revealed a complicated situation where the freedom women feel to appropriate public space often is very low. Due to social norms many women had expressed a distinct discomfort in male dominated public spaces, and to us it became a question of priority. Did we want to adopt a provocative, feminist approach and expect women to adapt to it? Or was it more important to make sure that as many women as possible got access to programs, functions and activities? In addition to the official exposure of women in public space, we have come to believe that women also need safe platforms where they feel comfortable to create social bonds that will empower them. We understand that the use of unexposed spaces is unconventional, but we stand by that it is an important tool when providing the possibility to claim public space for women with various abilities, needs and preferences. Rather than maintaining the status quo, we believe this approach enables women and fosters change.

The feminist perspective has shown us how important it is to listen to the local voices and include the local people in the decision making. A feminist project will therefore always be site and situation specific. The themes that we are discussing through our proposals are general and can be used for reflections in other places. The crafting of the tools, however, will always be specific due to the different context they respond to. A feminist approach also needs to be time responsive; over time the dynamics will change, and tools like separatist spaces and specific feminist programs might have to be altered. In fact, we hope that there will be no need for them, that a situation of greater equality will have grown. Instead they can be adapted and cater for the needs of other social groups and situations of inequality.

One of the questions that arose from the final critique was whether this project was a feminist or intersectional project. For us, the fact that we came in to this project as white academics with the power relations that carries with it has been a struggle from the beginning. Recognizing the importance of this dynamics, we tried to navigate this matter as sensitively as we could, resulting in a more culturally responsive approach. However, since we understand feminist approach as site and context responsive, we see intersectionality as being an important part of the larger feminist method.
We have come to realize that there is a hole in the professional knowledge on the issue on feminist architecture, one that in our opinion only can be filled through endless trying, discussing and learning from each other. We sought out connections, discussions with associations and groups working on similar projects. Through KvinnoVäxt we had the opportunity to present our work to planners and architects working with feminist design questions, and find points to agree or disagree on (like separatist spaces). We saw their work in Järva and were able to measure our proposals against their efforts, and ground them even further.

Through this project we explored a new field, and with it gained new perspectives for us as future professionals to work with. Even though some parts of our process are not visible in the final tools, a lot of our readings and discussions, listening to the locals, looking at the project from various scales, and investigating the area through a full body experience have helped us navigate this topic and contributed to leading us towards the proposals. By speculating on who benefits and loses from our decisions based on our situated knowledge, we gained a better understanding of the effects of our proposals.

At the same time, the limitations we had in terms of time span, our roles as outsiders, and language barriers taught us that it is a difficult task. A task that is unlikely to be made easier in a future professional project. Like all relationships, participatory tools have to be allowed time to be fruitful. As planners and designers we need to develop ways that allows us to reach groups to which we are outsiders. The knowledge we gained is one that we can take with us into projects to come, whether they have an outspoken feminist perspective or not.