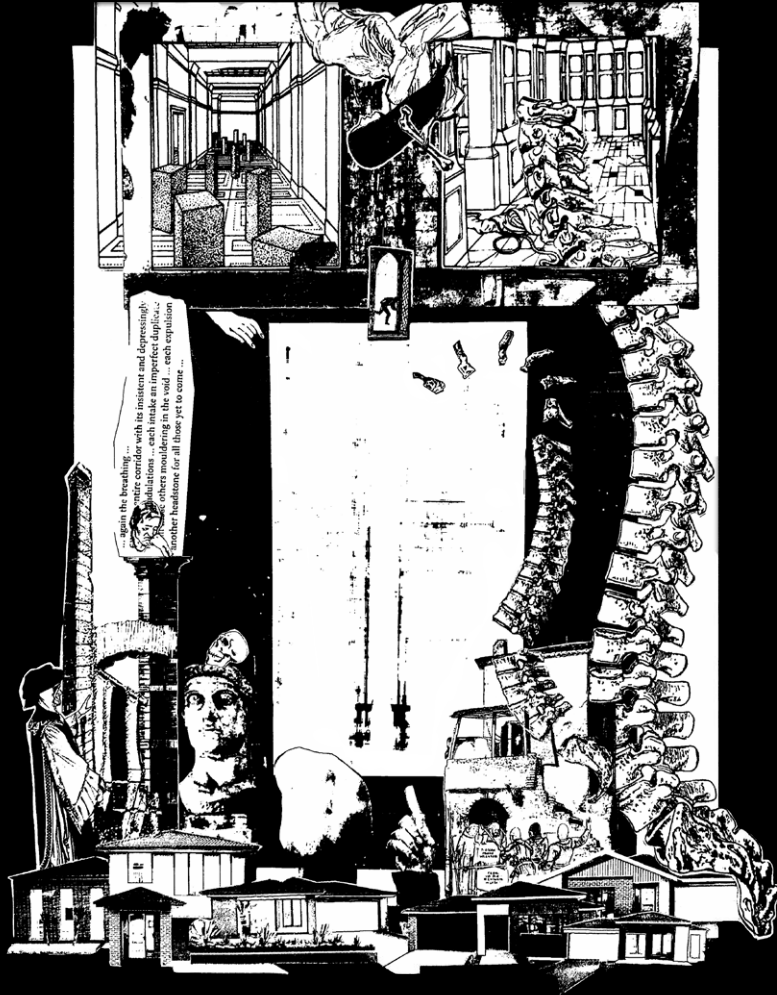


# URBAN CORPORIS

## TO THE BONES



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# Designing Togetherness

## Rethinking the Structure of the City from In-Between

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**Keywords:** Feminist critique, Urban thresholds, Urban structure, In-Between Space, Collectivity/Alterity/Performativity

### **Abstract**

*This paper delves into the feminist critique of architecture and explores the transformative potential of in-between spaces in reshaping the built environment. By adopting a feminist perspective, the project challenges the notion of a neutral user and seeks to design spaces that consider the needs of marginalized groups. The study focuses on the project “Making Space in Dalston” by muf architecture/art, which emphasizes collectivity, alterity, and performativity in the design process. The in-between spaces are seen as complex, relational realms that bind the city together and offer opportunities for emancipation and recognition. The paper highlights the significance of living bodies in spatial narratives and emphasizes the temporal aspects of design. This research contributes to the ongoing debate on feminist perspectives in contemporary design and advocates for more inclusive and equitable cities.*

## Undoing Patriarchy through Architectural Resistance in the In-Between Spaces

*From the perspective of feminist practice in architecture, practicing difference has evolved into practicing differently... Taking place differently (Petrescu, 2007, p. 37).*

Exploring the issues raised within this volume, “To the bones”, forces us to dissect the essence of the city, its material, but also (and maybe especially) immaterial character, in a constant interplay between ‘inanimate’ and ‘living’ matter. Despite the claims of universality and neutrality of the man-made environment, it is necessary to construct a spatial and architectural culture that acknowledges the inherent power struggles in creating space (Lefebvre, 1968; Foucault, 1995; Sassen, 2014). Within this context, gender relations both shape and are shaped by the built environment, perpetuating and reinforcing discriminatory practices (Weisman, 1992; Darke, 1996; Wilson, 1991). To the notion of architectural space understood only in physical terms, this text contrasts a feminist critique of architecture, where “location”, “situatedness” (Haraway, 1988) and “throwntogetherness” (Massey, 2005) enrich our understanding of space by encompassing not only its physical dimension but also cultural, social and relational aspects.

Adopting a feminist perspective in this analysis signifies a conscious political, cultural, and disciplinary position towards the architectural project. By embracing a feminist and gender perspective, the project avoids favoring a supposed ‘neutral’ user, which typically perpetuates gender inequalities by promoting a universal male norm. In feminist architectural literature, the focus has been on the presence of living bodies in physical space, signifying not only a political act of resistance but also an act of appropriation. This understanding recognizes the significance of one’s own body in relation to a specific place (Bianchetti, 2020, p. 8) and its potential to find self-recognition within that context. Consequently, the research explores how the notions of difference, embodiment, and location play a crucial role in reshaping the everyday spatial narrative through a feminist lens, actively reevaluating the roles of living (and gendered) bodies in the design process.

This contribution examines spaces from a different perspective, wherein architectural objects become the skeleton or supporting structure of the city. By removing spaces with a name, a clear and structured position and function in the world, rooted within a context, supported by ‘vital infrastructure’ like organs, what is left is the space in-between. These spaces serve as the binding force, enabling recognition and connecting diverse elements. Between private and public. Between individuality and multiplicity. Belonging to no one specifically and still to everyone. They are places where emancipation, recognition, and visibility happen. Like scattered bones, they find and gain meaning in their connection and sequence; like bones generate movement through articulations and ligaments.

The spaces in-between emerge as realms of relationship and possibility, capable of challenging, because still in becoming, the man-made city (Grosz, 2001). They play a central role in reimagining urban spaces from within so that they open toward the possibilities of a feminist city, breaking down patriarchal norms. As such, these spaces embody ambiguity, indeterminacy (Sola Morales, 1995), and simultaneity, as they remain open to the future. Relationships take center stage, where multiple and synchronous connections construct identities in a social and spatial dimension. Drawing on the concept of the “Ich un Du” (Buber, 1923), they become relational devices that transcend the public/private, individual/collective, and material/immaterial dualisms at the center of feminist research in architecture. This dimension of being between things, between people, and between times implies an intermediate spatial, physical condition

and a relational one between individuals and elements of the architectural project (fig. 01). The skeleton of architecture is envisioned as a complex, fragmented system that gains meaning through its togetherness, where space cannot be separated from what happens within. In this sense, the contribution positioned within a feminist critique of architecture, shifting the attention towards living bodies, and breaking down preconceived structures, offers a framework to rethink the “microphysics of everyday life” (Bassanini, 2008) in its spatial dimension, considering it what sustains and holds together the ‘body’ of the city. Accordingly, the paper presents a design experience that, starting from the occupation of these in-between spaces, has given a formal structure to the city. The project “Making Space in Dalston” by muf architecture/art which interprets a mode of appropriation and design of in-between space drawing on the reflection proposed by Jane Rendell in *Feminist Practices* (Rendell, 2011), reflecting on the categories of Collectivity, Alterity and Performativity as possibilities for the design of in-between space, but also as critical categories to build on for a feminist design. Feminist architecture proactively aims to design and collaboratively create spaces that consider the needs of women, non-binary individuals, and other marginalized groups based on race, social status, or economic background. The underlying belief is that such inclusive design benefits all space users. This approach promotes social equity and empowers marginalized communities. The co-design process serves as a platform to amplify their voices and perspectives, ensuring meaningful integration into the project.

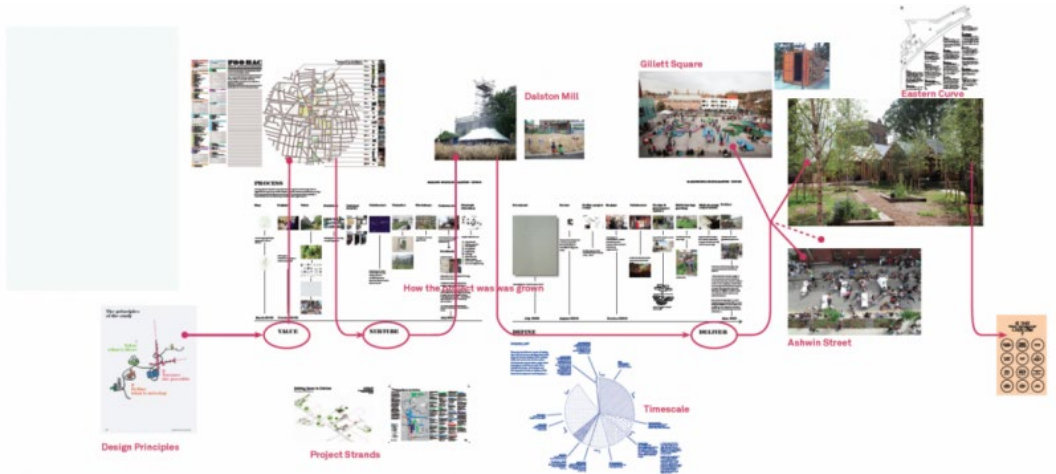
The paper contributes to the ongoing debate regarding the role of a feminist perspective in contemporary design at the in-between scale. The choice to concentrate on the spaces of the in-between is driven by their potential to open to a transformation within larger urban structures. These spaces, characterized as complex, relational, and open systems that can flexibly expand and contract, offer opportunities for increased connectedness. This, in turn, prompts novel Feminist architecture proactively aims to design and collaboratively create spaces that consider the needs of women, non-binary individuals, and other marginalized groups based on race, social status, or economic background. The underlying belief is that such inclusive design benefits all space users. This approach promotes social equity and empowers marginalized communities. The co-design process serves as a platform to amplify their voices and perspectives, ensuring meaningful integration into the project.

Considerations about the shape of cities, emphasizing concepts such as reciprocity, care, inclusion, equality, and the elimination of hierarchies, which are at the centre of feminist concerns in the design of spaces. By examining this work in Dalston the paper navigates the nuanced ways this project activates and reshapes the urban landscape, challenging preconceived notions of space and societal boundaries.

### **Interwoven Echoes: Embodying Collective Narratives, Shifting Alterity, and Performative Spatial Rhythms**

In exploring a design experience that fosters togetherness and allows for a rethinking of the city’s structure from within, this section delves into the transformative potential of the project Making Space in Dalston by muf architecture/art and J&L Gibbons. It is conceived as an alternative approach to regeneration through action research to design a shared vision at both grassroots and strategic levels. Located in London for the London Borough of Hackney, the first phase started in 2008 (fig. 02).

The brief envisioned ten costed projects and an action plan for amenity space, cultural programming and management. From this starting point, the project has focused on three main



02. The research phase. A collaborative interaction. © muf



03. Fragments and Words. Collage by the author based on images by © muf

concepts: Valuing what is there, Nurturing the possible and Defining what is missing (J&L Gibbons LLP and Muf Architects, 2009, p. 19). Here, the intention was to design and implement architectural interventions and spatial transformations developed through ten strategic themes: The high street (de-cluttering the pavements and widening pedestrian capacity), Release spaces (creating or enhancing spaces at street junctions to provide relief from pedestrian congestion), host spaces (supporting creativity by identifying both official and unexpected spaces for cultural and community activities), Ridley Road (its significance as a cultural asset), Way-finding (improve legibility and enhance the visibility of cultural venues), Heritage (Dalston's unique character and cultural assets are identified and mapped as part of a heritage walk), Temporary enhancements (temporary enhancements as precursors to more significant developments), Green Routes (for events, planting, play, and improving connectivity), Semi-Public Space (churchyards, school grounds, and rooftops are identified as secure and accessible spaces for the community), Cultural Programming (raise awareness of the urban environment, add meaning to public spaces through art projects) (fig. 03).

The focus is on identifying projects through dialogue and discussion, allowing the stakeholders themselves to become the driving force behind the proposed changes. This bottom-up approach not only nurtured the existing qualities of the neighbourhood but also tapped into its social capital and distinct physical character. The projects encompassed permanent and temporary interventions, including using spaces awaiting development. This approach primed the community for positive change and demonstrated the potential for incremental regeneration. In this sense, the project engages with the spaces in-between; those interstitial realms that bind together the urban fabric, opening up possibilities for emancipation, recognition, and the dismantling of patriarchal norms. The project aimed to foster social interaction, embrace diversity, and enable creative expression through a design process encompassing collectivity, alterity and performativity. Collectivity refers to the notion of community engagement where the design process is not an activity that leads to making a product but is instead the location of the work itself; communities, in this sense, are the product. Specifically, High-Street intervention focused on de-cluttering the high street pavements to create more space for social and economic interactions. By widening the pavements, increasing pedestrian capacity, and decreasing crossing distances, it aimed to alleviate congestion and enhance the overall street experience for the community. Alternatively, release Spaces identified opportunities at street junctions to create or enhance spaces that relieve pedestrian congestion, promoting connectivity and facilitating community engagement. Considering the notion of "Altering Practices", the project identified cultural nodes, such as Gillette Square and Bootstrap car park, and proposed spaces like Dalston Square, which served as important markers of cultural identity within Dalston. The project aimed to celebrate the neighbourhood's cultural diversity and collective memory by enhancing these spaces and implementing effective wayfinding strategies. Lastly, looking at Performativity: The project sought to integrate visual arts, film, and performance into the public realm. It identified formal and unexpected spaces, such as empty shops, community centres, and public squares, as cultural and community activities venues. By facilitating the temporary use of these spaces, the project provided opportunities for the creative community to showcase their work, contributing to the neighbourhood's vibrant cultural scene.

Moreover, the project emphasized the importance of realizing projects in the present, even during neighbourhood transformation. Temporary installations, such as the collaboration with the Barbican known as the "Dalston Mill" and hoarding projects involving mapping and music-making, added temporary delights and interests to the urban fabric, showcasing the existing

assets and potential of the area. This emphasis on collectivity ensures that the resulting public spaces reflect the needs, aspirations, and identities of the community while fostering a sense of ownership and collective responsibility (fig. 04).

### **Thresholds of Becoming: A Dance of Emancipation and Recognition**

*While the logic of 'becoming' may offer the potential for an infinite variety of constellations, forming and reforming in perpetual change, specific 'becomings' are always located, they are always fostered by their particular situation, historically, materially and critically (Petrescu, 2007, p. 23).*

As evanescent spaces within the urban fabric, the in-between “invite creative solutions” (Winterbottom 2000, p. 41) where through the relationships established between the people who pass through, inhabit, and animate them, they take on the character of “domestic living rooms” (Gehl, 2011). Looking at this project, the theme of in-between is declined in relation to threshold and sequence. Looking at spaces through their interconnectedness allows us to actively rethink proximity, everyday experiences in space, and how architecture shapes our lives. The sequence is a compositional method; it organizes a series of elements according to a pattern of meaning, bringing attention back to the notion of the movement of bodies in space. Understanding the value, meaning and pattern of inhabiting places is necessary to build “resilient subjects” (Schalk, 2017) (fig. 05).

Today, the space of in-between is a space that encompasses a plurality of actions, emotions, and relationships that can no longer be inscribed within defined categories but, on the contrary, represents a platform where everything can happen simultaneously. The urban space is no longer solely pacified and standardized but is the center of uncontrolled and indeterminate action by the actors who freely use it. By drawing upon the critical categories proposed by Jane Rendell in her work on feminist practices – collectivity, alterity, and performativity – the contribution considers how this project contributes to a feminist design discourse while offering novel insights into the potential of in-between spaces to shape more inclusive and equitable cities.

Therefore, it is imperative to approach the design of in-between spaces from a feminist perspective, encompassing a comprehensive vision for advocating the rights of all individuals and diverse voices (hooks, 2000). By incorporating democratic design, ethics, and politics, feminist practices bring visibility and empowerment to marginalized groups while examining how gender relations shape our environments. In this context, in-between spaces emerge as fertile grounds for expressing citizenship and humanitarian values, representing an interconnected system that permeates our cities. As such, they become a new structural framework that facilitates the reconnection of buildings, spaces, architectures, and squares, with the relationships between them established through thresholds assuming vital significance.

These spaces of creativity become the breeding ground for micro-strategies of resistance, wherein feminist practices focus on these actions as the initial formal means of reclaiming urban space in everyday life (Petrescu, 2007), intertwining the poetics and politics of space and where living (and gendered) bodies, assume a crucial role in guiding a spatial transformation. Feminist literature in architecture has referred to the physical presence of living bodies in space, defining both a political action of resistance and of appropriation, where the awareness of one’s own body coincides with knowledge of being in a place (Bianchetti, 2020, p. 8) and by extension its capacity to recognize itself in it. In this sense, bodies become a medium that bridges the relation between space and design, embodying a generative role in spatial transfor-





mation. Moreover, they become a medium to critically explore the relationship between space, body, gender and urban structure through time.

It is precisely this attention to the temporality of the project, between permanent, transitory, and 'meantime', that makes this space in becoming and makes possible appropriation and modification by the communities that inhabit it. Form and content acquire political and poetic value through this 'architecture as process' concept. 'Taking place differently' shows how, from a first gesture of reconquering a space, where through the movement of bodies, which re-measure, perceive, notate, represent and imagine a space, it is possible to set up processes that weave back together a multiplicity of experiences, which are inscribed in the materiality of space. By moulding spatiality and temporality with corporality, the in-between becomes an interdisciplinary device questioning and transforming the social conditions of a place.

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Feminist methodologies, encapsulated in muf's approach, have brought attention back to living bodies in space, with their own identities and characteristics, going beyond the abstract category of "usagers" devoid of phenomenal identity, incapable of recognizing itself in space. Furthermore, what emerges from this approach is the notion of different temporalities that co-exist and structure the process, modifying the meaning of space and, therefore, the space itself. Reflecting on the Dalston experience, this design approach poses many considerations that deserve further exploration. Its intrinsic complexity and interdisciplinarity make it an effective platform for dialogue among architects, communities, planners, and municipalities. However, defining a methodological approach to the process becomes crucial to empower architects, urban designers, and planners to redefine their roles. They must actively engage in the transformation, understanding how their actions shape the spaces and how the community reacts to these changes. Additionally, the issue of gentrification poses a real threat to this type of regeneration. Multiple levels of reflection are necessary - at the project, community, and municipal levels - to counteract this risk. Envisioning a project developed over time could be a starting point to avoid gentrification. However, it is also essential to consider how different project elements, once activated, can become supportive infrastructures for the local community. This way, they can acquire the means, knowledge, and tools to replicate these interventions independently, becoming self-reliant and less dependent on continuous external investments to sustain the project's goals outlined in the initial brief.

In conclusion, looking at the in-between spaces as scattered bones that derive significance from their interconnectedness and sequence allows these spaces to gain importance through their collective and transformative qualities. This approach challenges the deeply ingrained patriarchal boundaries within spatial contexts. When viewed in relation to the living tapestry of everyday life, these spaces become the canvas upon which unexpected and unconventional scenarios are drawn, shaped by layers of connections, bonds, and affinities. Throughout history, these places have fostered supra-spatial relationships, transcending mere measurements and

giving rise to social and collective geometries that form the foundations of urban organizations. It is through the spatial relationship between these in-between spaces that everyday life finds its form and meaning, intertwining with micro-stories of daily existence, weaving together unanticipated and extraordinary narratives that enrich our understanding of the places we inhabit.

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A BOOK ON ARCHITECTURE, ART, PHILOSOPHY AND URBAN STUDIES TO NOURISH THE URBAN BODY.

The second volume of *Urban Corporis*, titled "To the Bones", compiles reflections from architects, artists, and scholars who have extensively delved into the fundamental themes of contemporary architecture. By navigating a constant interplay between past and future, memory and innovation, and the realms of the natural, artificial, and virtual, these contributions put forth strategies for architectural, artistic, urban, and landscape projects that resonate with the fundamental principles shaping our built and perceived environment. They advocate for design approaches that synchronise with the foundational elements, referred to as "the bones", that structure the landscape while promoting forward-thinking considerations.