

'Journey into unfamiliar space', utopia in practice: interview with Lidewij Tummers

Margaret Andrews and Lidewij Tummers

Abstract

In this interview Lidewij Tummers explores issues relating to contemporary women's experience of architectural space, including urban space. Drawing on her experience as an architect, and informed by feminist and other contemporary theorizations of space, Tummers seeks to find ways in which women can 'journey' more effectively through the built environment, finding practicable utopias, in which existing architectural codes might be challenged.

Keywords: women; space; architecture; journey; utopia; urban; urbanism; Barcelona

Introduction

After graduating in 1989 from the Faculty of Architecture at TU Delft in the Netherlands, Lidewij Tummers worked on several projects that focused on technology and development in regeneration areas. She is also a senior consultant in the areas of sustainable building technology and energy efficiency, a role she has taken up internationally. Research with the Habitat and Development section of the Architecture Faculty of TU Delft, for example, took Tummers to Central America and Jordan. She has also worked in Hispanic and Latin-American contexts. In 1998 she contributed to the *Mujeres y ciudad* [Women and the city] initiative in Barcelona, which organized women in urban areas around issues of public space and participation. The initiative resulted in a guidebook on architecture and urban design. Tummers has maintained links with the city ever since.

In 1999 Tummers created the architectural studio Tussen Ruimte [Intermediate Space]. The studio's motto is 'change does not arise from the mainstream, in the voids there is room for happiness' – an assertion which she expands on in the interview below. The studio specializes in building for the cultural, public and educational sectors and produces designs for sustainable architecture.¹ Recent projects have included plans to extend and renovate a women's shelter and for flexible inner-city housing for single professionals of all ages. Exhibition work includes designing the travelling exhibition 'All around (the clock)' for the Dutch European Social Fund (ESF) 'daily networks and spatial planning' network, which focused on experimental projects and publications concerned with everyday routines and spatial planning

(2003–7). It also includes the construction of an architectural model accompanied by a short documentary about the reuse of prefabricated concrete components for the Follydock ‘newly built from old material’ exhibition which was shown at the Netherlands Architecture Institute, Rotterdam, in summer 2006. The folly itself is now scheduled to be built in summer 2007. A commitment to explore women’s experiences of architecture and cities permeates Tummers’s research, consultation and action-orientated projects. She has written about the task of building refuges from domestic violence for LOVER, the Dutch quarterly for feminist research, and pressed for social policies relating to gender and ethnicity to result in actual building production (Tummers 2003). She has also explored the role that time and daily routines play in urbanism for a publication of the Dutch STT (technology research foundation) (Tummers 2004). She is interested particularly in the ways in which different groups of citizens, including female citizens, traverse the city and experience space and time in cities, often against the grain of current urban organization and construction. Work in this area has led to a range of initiatives, including an experimental programme with Zuid-Holland Regional Council and the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs, for which Tummers has acted as technical consultant for the Social Policies Section. In this role she has supported work to enhance the impact of regional social policies regarding diversity and emancipation on urban planning. The project led to published recommendations for ways in which the patterns of everyday life could be incorporated in spatial plans (see www.ruimtevoorelke.dag.nl for further information). The project was followed by the development of a ‘Toolkit’ for the articulation of daily routines in urban planning. This is now being implemented in urban renewal projects by one of the major Dutch engineering consultancies and is being integrated by Tummers into TU Delft’s research and education programme in urbanism.

Tummers is active in exploring these and associated issues with other female professionals. In 2002, for the Dutch National Architecture Event ‘Time Flies’, Tussen Ruimte helped to organize a debate between professional women (most of whom had been active in emancipation initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s) about the effects of twenty years of social changes and the contemporary role of women in the Dutch building industry. In 2006 the practice also co-ordinated and authored a report for the Dutch network of women professionals in the building sector on the lack of women in decision-making positions in the industry (Tussen Ruimte 2006). A passionate interest in emancipation and social justice also informs Tummers’s and Tussen Ruimte’s action-orientated work, which aims to increase the accessibility of public space and the building sector to women, ethnic minorities and vulnerable groups. This connects with the current move within planning policies from prescriptive planning to development planning, which involves greater public consultation. Yet, while many consultation exercises in regeneration areas worldwide remain dry and bureaucratic, Tummers has developed an exciting methodology, which draws on creative exercises as well as debate to enable women to express their desires for the city and other spaces and to engage with specific regeneration projects that affect where they live.

The methodology that underpins these initiatives, which are designed to increase women's knowledge and insight into urban space and their ability to influence it, has been developed since 1989 and has come to be known as 'Journey into unfamiliar space'. The sense of allowing women to take a journey that lets them articulate their hopes for renewed spaces inflected Tussen Ruimte's contribution to the 'Mujeres y ciudad' initiative in Barcelona which facilitated groups of women in urban neighbourhoods. The 'Journey' has been applied in other Hispanic and Latin-American contexts, in Madrid and San José and also in Berlin with students of the Faculty of Architecture. For her rich contribution to the conference 'Gender and the imagined city' Tummers talked about and illustrated her work on the 'Journey' and accompanied this with a workshop at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) that took participants through a number of creative and hands-on activities that inform the facilitatory 'Journey into unfamiliar space' (see also the Introduction to this volume). The 'Journey' departs from personal experience and analyses the city at different scales (home-neighbourhood-city, mobility-urban governance) and 'ends' with the mobilization of women around issues of urban space that they have identified as priorities. At all stages the aim is to connect women to city space and architectural practice. The media used to do this vary from making models of scrap materials to map-making, drawing, role-playing and other forms of representation. The 'Journey' has developed over the years to become an ongoing exchange between theory and practice, challenging women to represent and project their ideas about space. The purpose is to understand if, and how, the built environment in each particular urban context reproduces gender relations and to 'appropriate' urban infrastructures to improve conditions. Tummers emphasizes that this way of working never fails to produce energy: the initial hesitation to talk about fantasies and use pencils or scrap material soon becomes an endless source for talk, identification, overcoming differences of ability in verbal expression through emotion and laughter. For Tummers, such an act of 'drawing utopia' is a form of appropriating space and enhancing communication – the force of creativity – that women are using far too little. The V&A workshop illuminated the transformative nature of such activities, as participants began to open up about what space and landscape meant to them. Landscapes created from scrap, for example, revealed different journeys through spaces and cities, speaking touchingly of problems encountered, shelters found and transformations wished for – for both the self and others. Yet also strikingly, common desires linked these imagined landscapes, including the desire for spaces of refuge and liminal spaces, which allowed for rest and transition. Tummers's work cuts right to the heart of the imagined city, as the reimagining of space, catalysed by creative activity and engagement that may inform the transformation of material spaces.

Interview

Margaret Andrews: What led you to make women's experiences of the city one of the main focuses of Tussen Ruimte's practice?

Lidewij Tummerts: What makes one become a feminist? I think there are two angles to this: first, I am a woman and so operate from my own experience, perhaps more critically or explicitly than other colleagues. Whether or not, and to what extent this makes a difference in our architectural projects is food for debate! Secondly women's experience is the object of some of the projects, like the 'Journey' or design for women's refuges. I find it fortunate that women's organizations have been able to grow and professionalize and become 'clients' instead of having to get everything together in the margin and with volunteers. But often they still operate on low budgets and in insecure positions, in between the margin and the mainstream. I find that my professional skills can contribute something to enhance their position, for example provide liveable space with efficient logistics, help them spend less on energy and maintenance costs or negotiate with property owners or building departments. I'm equally pleased to be able to find inspiration in a body of feminist thinking about architecture, as part of the professional debate and theories, and in projects organized and/or designed by women.

MA: You say that as a feminist and an architect you use a range of approaches to represent urban space and spatial ideas in order to promote social change. Could you say more about how particular Tussen Ruimte projects show this?

LT: I was referring to the range of ways architects represent space, which may include models, technical drawings and collages. The choice of method depends on the purpose: for example, a contractor who has to quote a price needs a different briefing from a local government wanting to understand what an intervention in a certain part of town is all about. Obviously all these types of representation can be potentially manipulative and in any case imply a number of (social) codes. When working with or for social change – which is itself a difficult term – it's important to be aware of these codes, either to change them (for example, make a flexible floor plan instead of one that suits only the size and hierarchical structure of a nuclear family) or to use them for one's own purpose. In other words, do not repeat professional traditions without question as the structure of gender relations in society is reproduced at all levels (Massey 1994, Durning and Wrigley 1995, Rendell *et al.* 2000 have all written about this). If we look at some projects in more detail, in SOLO (a low-budget housing scheme for single people), for instance, we started from the idea that singles aren't alone all the time. So instead of creating a miniature standard dwelling with kitchen-diner and bedroom Tussen Ruimte made three spaces articulated in a way that allowed them to be separated or connected as privacy needs dictated. This meant that the inhabitant could, for example, sleep children from a former marriage, receive clients and work at home, have a party or use the dwelling in a 'classical way' without disturbing private space or having to improvise complicated arrangements. This floor plan broke with the classical image of single people being either (undemanding) students or (care-dependent) senior citizens. For a shelter we had to negotiate which category of regulations was applied in order to acquire building permission, as the category 'shelter' doesn't exist. For a housing collective we recalculated the budget, as

the tenants themselves were responsible for finding new members so that there was no loss of rent for the owner during changes (a risk percentage that is added to rent-levels). For flexible housing we can't apply the obligatory software to calculate energy-use as assumptions about temperature, ventilation and so on are different from those applicable to standard, mono-functional rooms. In other words, even when realizing innovative projects we need to take building codes into account and make in-depth technical calculations in order to get them through the building process intact. Design and representation, then, are often concerned with small shifts in discourse or comparative differences. The same project can be represented either in a way that makes it easy to understand (which is why we often use models or 3D drawings) or in a way that conceals certain aspects. In 'participation' processes this is a major issue for consideration, as a means of communication, but I think representation is also a form through which to reflect on one's own prejudices.

MA: In respect of your 'Journey into unfamiliar space' methodology, why do women have to 'journey' into the city? Are they not there already or are they not in the cities they wish to inhabit?

LT: Interesting that you should put 'unfamiliar space' as synonym for 'city'! The 'Journey' is about discovering one's own perceptions and the set of values regarding space and the built environment. It has a lot to do with Christina Thürmer-Rohr's concept of 'Niemandland' ['no man's land'] and 'vagabundieren' ['vagabonding'] (Thürmer-Rohr 1991). (When I read her book, I was able to move on with the journey from a way to organize a creative process to using the power of imagination to build insight and concrete action.) She argues that if one doesn't accept a given role, one enters a zone where existing codes do not apply. Roaming that 'no man's land' is an opportunity to explore or invent new codes and to interrogate the existing ones. As an architect I've interpreted the roaming and the territories in a spatial way. For a start many women are unfamiliar with thinking about space, so the journey is also about discovering what spatial or urban conditions mean to our lives: for example, how much time gets lost in transport or how much energy in unhealthy conditions; who actually makes decisions about urban structures or how important it is to have 'a place of one's own'.

MA: The city of Barcelona has played a central part in the development of your 'Journey into unfamiliar space' methodology. How has your ongoing relationship with women in this city helped to develop this methodology, which you identify as merging both theory and practice?

LT: Perhaps it is not so much the city itself as a group of women in Barcelona who (in the 1990s) took the initiative to do a project about Women and the City. This group contains, notably, the architect/composer Anna Bofill, the historian Isabel Segura and women associated with the Fundación Maria Aurèlia Capmany. They invited me to offer examples from the Netherlands. Considering the high potential of this group,

I proposed a brainstorming session instead, which they accepted (I'm emphasizing this because it implied – logistically – a lot more than just an afternoon of talk and discussion; beforehand, they didn't have a clue what they were going to do and I of course couldn't guarantee that there would be a satisfactory outcome). Travelling the Journey with them meant a deeper process, and formulating new ideas that really connect to the local dynamic and its priorities. As a result they decided to start a programme of neighbourhood workshops, so I had to write a guide to methodology for them. This was later absorbed into the European project, and applied in other places.² Local action is the first aim but the results have also been used to write a more general book of recommendations for city planners. This project is now finished. Some of the women who initiated it work currently for the Catalan region, and are taking the opportunity to organize training for workshop moderators, promote the participation of women in planning processes, influence the faculty's curriculum and



Figure 1 Fieldwork in Santa Catalina during the training for workshop moderators, Barcelona 2005. © Lidewij Tummers

publish a new guide of recommendations for professionals. I am of course delighted that things have developed in this way. With this new focus I had to reconsider my way of working and also transfer it to different operational scale; we have also encountered the limits of institutional change ...³

MA: When calling for contributions to the conference ‘Gender and the imagined city’, I was thinking primarily of digital cities and other ‘virtual’ imagined cities represented through literature. Your contributions on architecture and the workshop in particular took my thinking in a challenging new direction, because it did seem that the model-making and role-playing involved in the ‘Journey’ methodology might produce a collective reimagined city that could lead to changes in more concrete actual cities. In what ways might you see a productive mingling of more imagined and more concrete versions of the city in your work?

LT: Architects imagine, draw, build and thereby transform the city. Of course we are very much tied to clients’ briefings, building regulations, zoning plans, building components and budgets, etc. What I do in the ‘Journey’, I think, is to share a design process outside this context. It gives an opportunity, as it were, to escape from everyday realities and look back on them from a distance so as to formulate more adequate criticism and solutions; also to formulate our own briefings and giving shape to them, sometimes in reverse order.⁴ It’s a mutual process; my awareness grows as much as that of the participants, and I take that back to my general practice. Of course I am not the only one doing this, in fact this type of *atelier* [workshop] is a growing practice and my ‘Journey’ includes elements from many others. The difference consists in the focus on women’s experience, in the way it is structured and in the multi-layered approach. (Anyway, I took a chance on your acceptance of my interpretation of ‘virtual’ and I am really glad it worked out this way!)

MA: With reference to the ‘Journey into unfamiliar space’ workshop, you talk about ‘drawing utopia’ as a form of appropriating space and enhancing communication. Can you say more about this? Why is reimagining the city through collective, creative engagement, as well as through more measured reflection, such an important part of this process?

LT: All through history people – not just architects and certainly not only men – have been shaping and expressing their ideas about social relations in spatial forms. If this amounts to an alternative to dominant structures or a futuristic vision of how things could be (offering better living conditions in most cases), it is labelled as utopia, the imagined place. Frequently, however, this is actually the start of a building process or a change in the habits of practice; whether modification in standard housing plans (that allows for a change in family relations) or inventing new building technology (that allows for sustainable living or being able to modify the building according to individual needs). Envisioning how things can be enhances the confidence that they actually can be realized. It also forces you to find out how it can become a reality, which implies finding out a lot about how a production process works and why it is that urban planning and architecture (in this case) is being done the way it is. It then becomes clear where you have to start making changes. This is always contextualized: in 2005, for example, Tussen Ruimte organized a short (one-day) journey for around one hundred female employees of a large housing association. Consequently they



Figure 2 Visualizing imagined space makes it possible to share ideas. © Margaret Andrews

rewrote the briefing the company gives to urbanists and architects for new developments, incorporating new requirements, such as child-friendly streets and different housing typology. At present we're working with a collective who discovered this in a painful way: although in fully legal existence for more than twenty years, they are threatened with eviction, thus discovering that their way of living is not acceptable to developers and planners. On the basis of the 'Journey', they produced a wonderful document stating what they are and what they contribute to the creative city. This has convinced new partners and allowed them to design a survival strategy. (For me this was the first time I had travelled in a 'mixed' group; the issues were slightly different but it worked well.)

My interest in this is not only in realizing individual dreams, such as building your own tailor-made house, but also about changing structures. These are much more abstract and invisible and I don't believe it can be done individually. In the case of the housing association it required modifications to institutionalized documents and contracts. In the case of the collective it included (re)defining their position in respect to urban governance and their role as 'clients', even reconsidering their expectations of the architect – not presenting them with solutions but allowing them to articulate what they wanted in architectural terms. So part of the 'Journey' is first to discover the power of one's own imagination, and to get accustomed to making space and thinking/experiencing in spatial terms, eventually confronting these with other

'utopias', experiences and theory. Making visible utopian thoughts – making drawings or models – is just a means to share them and focus the issues.

MA: Some of the areas in which you work (such as sustainable development) relate to a very serious global agenda, yet aspects of the 'hands-on' work are also quite playful. Historically some forms of feminism have found space for play as a form of resistance to domination, yet others have framed playfulness as a lack of political 'seriousness'. How do the elements of seriousness and playfulness work in the ways in which you and your collaborators reimagine and reconstruct the city?

LT: Playing is a learning process. Men play much more than women; see, for example, the statistics of internet-use. It's a way to acquire skills, discover and appropriate (familiarize, practise, increase the radius of action). It allows women to get away from all kinds of stereotyping. Having fun is an effective way of generating energy and escaping from victimization, balancing the often frustrating or saddening realities of the global agenda. It doesn't at all exclude being critical or political or dealing professionally with a building or negotiating process. Certainly 'creativity' is often a form of escapism, but it helps a lot in changing angles and challenging rigid patterns.

MA: Tussen Ruimte translates into English as 'Intermediate Space' and the practice's motto is 'change does not arise from the mainstream; in the voids there is room for happiness'. How does this work in respect of both imagined and more concrete cities?

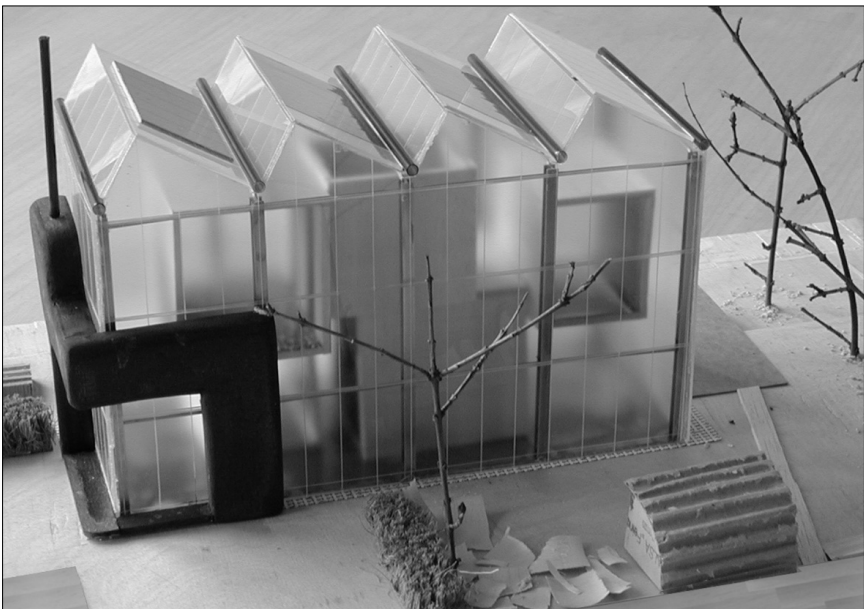


Figure 3 Polderdroom [polder dream]: ultraflexible interior captured in formal building envelope, Tussen Ruimte 2001. © Lidewij Tummers

LT: That we have more fun doing our job and that there are always 'voids' in the sense of intermediate spaces in our designs. Rather than leaving a mark as the architect, we attempt to create space for self-realization – where the (to us) unpredictable takes place. Furthermore it refers to the *interaction* rather than the *position* of the partners in a building process.

MA: One of the things that I find so exciting about your work is that it bridges potentially what is imagined and what is more concrete in the city through a release of women's creativity that might result in changes to the built environment. But how do we move from one to another? If participants in your workshops have reimagined a city that would appear to be better for women, how do they begin to see it constructed in stone as well as paper?

LT: A complete 'Journey' – as it takes place in neighbourhoods – involves the 'building' or transformation in that its final step consists in establishing priorities and setting out actions to achieve whatever the group decides is necessary to change about spatial, urban, conditions. From there on they are 'on their own' (in the European project they organized regular feedback meetings both for mutual support and to collect recommendations for their final book). This can vary: in *barrios* [neighbourhoods] in Barcelona and Greater Barcelona, such as Hospitalet, Montjuïc and San Andreu we saw women negotiating for better bus services and improved

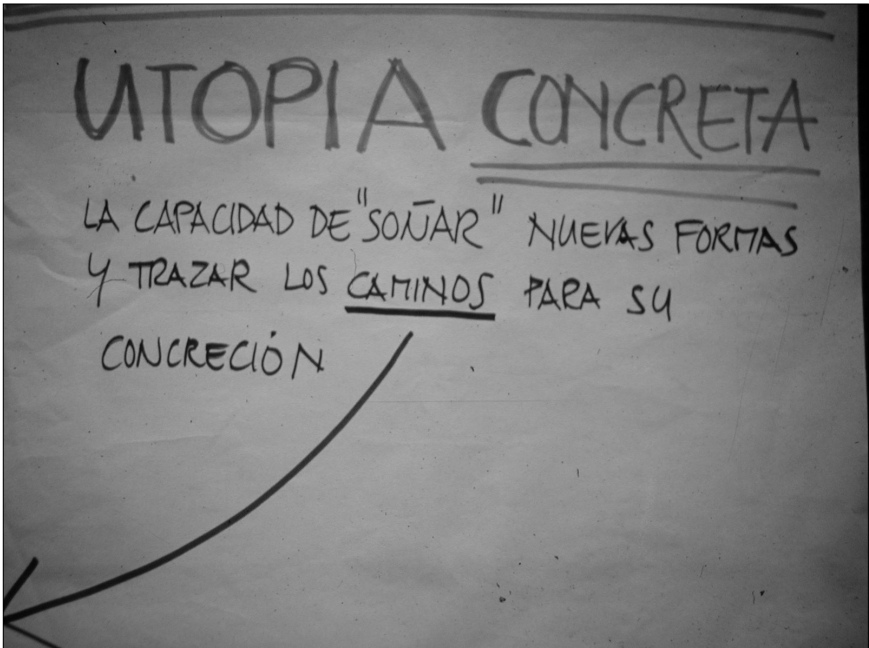


Figure 4 Notes from the postgraduate course 'Women and the City', where elements of the journey were applied for the first time, Costa Rica 1989. © Lidewij Tummers

facilities at stops; claiming a position in a major urban planning process; creating a proposal for a square; taking officials for a nightly walk to put safety on the agenda to begin with, asking a housing company to create apartments in addition to their family home-building programme; opening market facilities in a suburb, and so on. What was vital here was the contact between city dwellers, professionals in public office and designers because they continued to network after the collective experience.

A utopia, in my view, is not a completely 'free' and fresh new model, but always needs to be placed in its context (geographically as well as in time and culture). It is a means to analyse and to develop alternatives. The 'built utopias' are of course full of compromise yet still an achievement. I think I operate on the basis that we don't have the opportunity to start all over again on a blank page, but that we need to find out what the rights and wrongs in our environment are in order to define the local agenda and opportunities.

MA: What, if anything, has undertaking the 'Journey' workshop in London added to your thoughts about your work?

LT: Looking back on a variety of 'Journeys', I conclude once again that, all over the world, it is still necessary for we women to explore and express our views on the built environment. The seminar and workshop in London confirmed that to mobilize creativity, as a group, is a productive way to articulate spatial needs and aspirations: utopia is then encountered not as a 'dream' but as a means to more informed action and collaboration. Thank you for giving me the opportunity of confronting my methodology with that of other disciplines and for your questions! Our dialogue has contributed to the effectiveness of the 'Journey' and has raised questions for further investigation. The journey goes on ...

Notes

1. See www.tussen-ruimte.nl for further information on Tussen Ruimte's work, www.puingaaf.nl for work on the reuse of building components and www.tijd-en-ruimte.nu for work on time-based urbanism.
2. The earlier 'Women and the City' initiative started locally, then applied for and was awarded funding from the European Social Fund.
3. Unfortunately due to political circumstances this project came to a halt in May 2006.
4. The normal procedure is first a briefing by the client, followed by a design by the architect. In the 'Journey', we first design and make a model, then discuss its possible uses.

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