

Caring Architecture

Joan C. Tronto

What would caring architecture and urban design require? This question is not about the better design of so-called care institutions, about hospitals and homes for the aged. To follow the ways in which feminist scholars have reoriented the concept of care in the past generation requires an entirely new way of seeing the relationships among the built environment, nature and humans. Using care as a critical concept will require a fundamental reorientation of the disciplines of architecture and urban planning.

The starting point to making this shift is, in the first place, to see architecture as a reflection of power. Of course, architecture is a mode of artistic expression, a practical science to create built structures and environments; it is also an ultimate form of human power. When architects express ideas, they often do so in a way that draws upon and requires the deployment of vast material and human resources. Throughout human history and in civilizations around the world, architectural accomplishment has displayed such power. The device humans first seized upon to make themselves more god-like, according to the Torah and Old Testament, was a tower. In this case, their God took umbrage and confounded language so that humans would no longer be able to concentrate their collective power so effectively. That their God took the Tower of Babel as an affront to divine power tells us much about the permanence, solidity, and concentration of power that comes with the built environment that architects create.

Because their work usually requires vast resources, architects have often been in the service of the tastes and interests of the most powerful who command them. Whole epochs are captured in important buildings and structures, whether dams, city plans, cathedrals, castles, skyscrapers, football stadia, bridges,

McMansions, public housing projects or gardens. Many times the goal is to overawe or control those who live in and around such structures. Capitalism, as an economic system that produces vast disparities in wealth, has rewarded architects and urban designers who have mirrored the values of capitalism: displays of great wealth, paeans to consumption, more efficient factories, and, in the neoliberal era, urban designs that attract the right sorts of people to the neighborhoods capital favors. Some decisions seem to be remarkable displays of brutish disregard: when a new American football stadium was built in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2017, its beautiful glass structure posed an obvious hazard for migrating birds. Although the builders spent \$1.1 billion, nearly \$500 million of it in public funds, they declined to use a more bird-friendly glass that would have cost an additional \$1 million.¹ On the other hand, architects and builders can also engage with their environment in ways that are friendlier to life forms: there is also the possibility of, and in some times even a keenness for, public squares, affordable housing, welcoming walkways, parks and public spaces.

The point is not that contemporary architects and planners are all uncaring; the point is that they are caring wrongly. They are caring about *things*, and, often, about the wrong things. When feminists began writing about care, they often started from the frames of caring that they knew best, about caring for (usually) vulnerable people such as children, people with illnesses, elderly people. But as scholarship has advanced, care theorists have begun to acknowledge that other sets of caring concerns are usually ascribed to men, and these are especially the caring tasks of protection and production.² So when men work and bring home a paycheck, they describe this activity as a form of care. The problem is that the paycheck money itself is not care; it needs to be transformed into clean clothing, food, a safe and pleasant place to live.³ Doing so requires participating in the ongoing relations of those who are cared for. Buildings protect people from the elements. But by themselves, they do not provide care; what happens within the buildings, how the building fits within its location and context, how it was built, who it will house or displace, all of these aspects vitally affect the nature of the caring that the building does. Most frequently, then, architects and planners are caring about the world from the standpoint of using “things” to give voice to particular sentiments, especially to power and capital. Consider how some modernist architects rued how the sleek look of their buildings would be ruined by the humans who used them: “Mies understood

1 Josh Peter, “Site of Super Bowl LII is a death trap for birds,” *USA Today*, January 21, 2018, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/sports/columnist/josh-peter/2018/01/30/site-super-bowl-2018-death-trap-birds-eagles-patriots-us-bank-stadium/1079934001/>.

2 Peter D. Jacobson, *Care and the City* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
3 Batya Weinbaum and Amy Bridges, “The Other Side of the Paycheck: Monopoly Capital and the Structure of Consumption,” in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, ed. Zillah R. Eisenstein (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1979).

that the geometry of his building would be perfect until people involved.”⁴

4 Andrew S. Dolkart, “The Architecture and Development of New York City: The Birth of the Skyscraper,” Digital Knowledge Ventures, Columbia University, 2003, http://nycarchitecture.columbia.edu/global/0242_2_media.html.

5 David Gissen, *Big and Green: Toward Sustainable Architecture in the 21st Century* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003).

6 “Sustainable Architecture,” *Pacific Standard*, June 13, 2018, <https://psmag.com/environment/past-present-and-future-of-sustainable-architecture/>.

7 Nina Rappaport, “Real Time/Implication for Production Spaces,” in *ACADIA Conference reForm ()-Building a Better Tomorrow*, Chicago, October 22-25, 2009 (Chicago: ACADIA, 2009); Nina Rappaport, “Preserving modern architecture in the US,” in *Modern Movement Heritage*, ed. Allen Cunningham (London and New York: E & FN Spon, 1998).

Caring architecture will not be the same thing as sustainability as important as that movement is.⁵ Sustainability began in the 1960s as an attempt to make architecture more sensitive to its environmental impact.⁶ But as it was institutionalized, its standards shifted about things: it focused more on the materials used and it has been more successful in measuring what goes into a building than in monitoring the ongoing effects of sustainable building. Because care emphasizes processes and relationships that extend back and forward through time, and concerning all of the created relationships, applying care theory to architecture would involve making a fundamental shift in perspective: care does not view the complete “thing”—building, park, city zone, etc.—as its *object*. It starts instead from responsibilities to care, not only for this “thing,” or creator, builder, or patron, but for all who are engaged in contact through this thing. For example, what happened to the people, shops, goods, community, displaced to make room for this park? Who will occupy the space in the future? How were the building materials collected? (Do the LEED standards sometimes also get “gamed,” for example?) Who will clean and care for this building street, infrastructure? Has it been built to last, or only built to last for as long as the builder remains responsible for manufacturing defects? While some scholars of architecture have begun to pay attention to such questions,⁷ what would it mean to have such an integrated, caring, approach to architecture?

Here is where a feminist-inspired, relational, critical care approach begins to change our perspective entirely. Rather than thinking of buildings as things, thinking of them in relationships—with ongoing environments, people, flora and fauna—that exist through time as well as in space, changes the approach fundamentally.

Here is a modest claim that I offer to present and future architects: for our broken planet, we now need an architecture of care. Going beyond the ideas of “what the client wants,” even beyond “green” or “sustainable” architecture, beyond the ideal of building a beautiful object, we now need an architecture that fulfills the basic tasks of sharing responsibilities for caring for our world, an architecture that is sensitive to the values of repair, of preservation, of maintaining all forms of life and the planet itself.

How then to arrive at a caring architecture? First we need to define care; then we need to see how it might begin to offer an

alternative relational paradigm. Defining care is difficult; the term has many meanings. Some years ago, my colleague Berenice Fisher and I wrote:

In the most general sense, care [is] *a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible.* That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.⁸

This definition usually provokes frustration, because it is quite broad and does not well specify what should count as “care” and what is outside of its purview. This definition is deliberately broad. Western thought has done a good job of thinking about production as the center of human life and of pushing the dimensions of care to the sidelines. Our goal in defining care so broadly was in part for us to see that care is a part of almost all aspects of our lives. Yet there are several ways to begin to discern where and what is care.

In the first place, most activities do not happen at this “most general level” of care, and so one needs to consider more specific care practices. Other care practices are “nested” within other care practices to arrive at more general forms of care. Just as building requires assembling structural elements, plumbing, electrical lines, carpentry, etc., to make the entire building, and just as each of these activities must be done to its own standards in order to make the whole cohere, so too in the world of care many caring practices are woven together. Raising children is different from caring for one’s adult self, which is different from caring for aged parents. Cleaning house is nested into these other types of care. Nevertheless, the point of care practice on this most general level is to make certain that these pieces all come together into a complex, life-sustaining web.

In the second place, care is always an activity, a practice. When people begin to think of caring practices, they often think of themselves as care givers, and as the receivers of care. But it is important for us to recognize that people, animals, plants, and other natural and artificial things are also enmeshed in practices of care. Given that care is an activity, it is sometimes difficult for people to switch and notice that care receiving is also a vital part of care.

In the third place, the definition sets a standard for judging care, “so that we may live in [the world] as well as possible.” What this standard means, obviously, varies depending upon the decision of any community of “we.” Every society engages in caring activities, and they do so according to their standards of living in the world

8 Joan C. Tronto and Berenice Fisher, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring,” in *Circles of Care*, eds. Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990).

“as well as possible.” To evaluate whether care occurs well or badly then, requires attention to the purpose of living well and to the purpose of care. This concern is highly political then. What we care about determines what kind of a society we are.

Beyond this definition of care, Fisher/Tronto also specified four aspects of care to help explain the nature of care practices: *caring about*, *caring for*, *care giving*, and *care receiving*. In 2013, I added a fifth phase to these, *caring with*. These phases deserve some elaboration, and in doing so, we can get a starting sense of the importance of a relational way of thinking about care in architecture.

Before we do, we should also note that care grows out of feminist thought for a particular reason. It may well seem as if, up until now, care is a soft and sentimental feminine activity. Indeed, throughout most of Western thought, discourses of care have been used to describe feminized processes of reproduction in the private, everyday lives of people. While some aspects of care do embody this set of sentiments, these care dimensions—what to care about, how to care for it, who will do the actual work of care, how to evaluate care, and how to make care into collective patterns and habits of care—are also undeniably about power and political will. At this point, then, deciding who and what to care about, and how to care for them, are highly contested. If care only means protecting the interests of the wealthy, it will result in a different architecture than one designed to repair the world. Caring to repair our broken world provides the political stakes of a caring architecture. Consider, then, a brief elaboration of these phases of care, and how they might change architectural perspective.

Caring about means that we are attentive to the needs that need to be addressed. Before any caring process can begin, someone has to recognize the need for care. This is a more difficult task than it at first seems: some needs are made difficult to see or deliberately ignored. One of the ways that neoliberal spaces organize themselves is to separate people by class so that more wealthy people rarely encounter their poorer neighbors and their needs.⁹ Even if caring needs are recognized, they are often in conflict with each other. Which needs should count more? Should the caring needs of wealthy clients, whose “needs” for huge houses spread out on large parcels of landscaped suburban lawn, count more than the needs of farmers, less wealthy people, the earth itself?

Caring for is the phase of care that concerns the acceptance and allocation of responsibility. Once one has noticed a caring need, someone needs to step up and claim responsibility for it, or

⁹ Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* (New York: Random House, 2012).

determine who else might be responsible. Stepping past a homeless person on the street in a city is a way to avoid responsibility. But what ought one to do? Throw some money in the cup? Take her home? Call the police? Support more housing for the poor? Deciding to act and to take on these unmet needs is another critical aspect of caring. For architects, we can ask that caring for involves taking responsibility for the entire process of building. Architects should take responsibility for how building materials are obtained, moved, and the environmental impact of those processes, of what has been displaced, and of how the building will be maintained. In building their football stadium, the Vikings ignored the impact of their glass building on migratory birds and, when the dangers were pointed out to them, refused to take responsibility for the situation. At what point do we excuse builders from the consequences of their decisions and processes? A more caring architecture would reach more deeply into these questions and allot responsibility for unintended effects also.

Care giving requires attention to the actual acts of care giving. In the process of building, are the workers protected and cared for? Human Rights Watch in 2017 issued a critical report on the treatment of construction workers in Qatar, working on football stadia for the FIFA World Cup in 2022.¹⁰ If a building is meant to provide shelter, for example, how does it do that? How do materials and workers get chosen, transported, used?

Care receiving. Once care giving is completed, what happens next? Because care processes go on, everyone and everything involved in the care process will be affected and transformed in some way by this process. How well were the needs that began the process met? Different participants in the process may decide that the process worked well, or poorly. In buildings and planned neighborhoods, ongoing monitoring is necessary. As time passes, how well does the building stand up? How easy or difficult is it to maintain the building? Who pays for ongoing repairs? What kinds of activities and responsibilities should users take on? At this point, care receiving requires that people notice what additional needs might be generated by having cared. And so the processes of caring begin again with determining needs, responsibilities, and doing care.

Caring with. The recurring nature of care raises another set of concerns. Does care become reliable over time? When care needs are met reliably through time, people can develop an appreciation for those around them who provide such ongoing care. In such cases, care becomes a way to foster solidarity and trust among people.

10 David Conn, "Thousands of Qatar World Cup workers 'subjected to life-threatening heat,'" *The Guardian*, September 27, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2017/sep/27/thousands-qatar-world-cup-workers-life-threatening-heat>.

Such solidarity and trust has a salutary effect: it makes it more likely that others will respond to the care that they have received in a reciprocal manner. In this way, despite the fact that care begins from asymmetrical needs, people may be able to see how participating in ongoing circles of care make them, over the course of time and through a life-cycle, somewhat more equal. Such reciprocity makes it more likely that people will recognize needs, take responsibility for the needs of others, participate in care giving and be honest about how well care is working. When people live in communities where such caring seems a part of their ongoing life together, they feel safer, pay more attention to their environment.

Of course, if some do not see or understand the care that they are receiving, or undervalue it, such caring will not develop.

This leads us to a recognition of this key final point: just as architecture, as I argued at the opening of this essay, is about power, so too all forms of care are shot through with relations of power. Usually, those with needs are in positions of lesser power, but this is not always the case. But here is the looming question then. How might we turn our power towards caring for our broken world? Architects and urban planners will surely provide a critical part of the answer to this question, if they care enough to try.

Joan C. Tronto is a professor of political science at the University of Minnesota, and professor emerita of political science at the City University of New York. She received her BA degree from Oberlin College and her PhD from Princeton University. In 2014 she was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University for Humanistic Studies in the Netherlands. Tronto has published extensively on the subject of care as a political idea. Her publications include over forty articles and several books, of which the most prominent are *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) and *Caring Democracy* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).