Contribution to the 7th Global Report on Local Democracy and Decentralization (GOLD VII) on the **Economies of Equality and Care**

Care-full City Planning:

insights across contexts

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1. What is Care?

"Urban researchers have expanded ideas of the sustainable city, the resilient city, the smart city, the creative city, the just city, and the sharing city. Why not the caring city? Is it possible that cities might be judged not on how economically competitive they are but on how they best facilitate care for people, planet, animals, and future generations?"¹

Care has been a focus of scholarship in urban design and architecture,^{2 3} housing studies,⁴ and urban geography more broadly.^{5 6} There is a burgeoning set of academic work in urban geography and urban planning that focuses on care as an ethics, politics, and practice that is mobilised to explain and respond to present urban concerns.⁷ The most well-cited definition of care in academic circles comes from Fisher and Tronto who define it as 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 expansive definition of care moves beyond an understanding of care as confined to the domestic sphere, practiced by women and associated with professionalised care services alone.⁹ Rather, care is understood to be a life-sustaining practice of maintaining, continuing and repairing our worlds in

⁷ Power and Williams, "Cities of care: a platform for urban geographical care research."





¹ Emma Power and Miriam Williams, "Cities of care: a platform for urban geographical care research," *Geography Compass* 14, no. 1 (2020): 9, https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12474.

² Juliet Davis, *The Caring City, Ethics of Urban Design*, 1 ed. (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022). http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2jtxrfc.

³ C. Bates, R. Imrie, and K. Kullman, *Care and Design: Bodies, Buildings, Cities* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017). https://books.google.com.au/books?id=bSYPDQAAQBAJ.

⁴ Emma Power and Kathy Mee, "Housing: an infrastructure of care," *Housing Studies* 35, no. 3 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2019.1612038.

⁵ Miriam Williams, "The possibility of care-full cities," *Cities* 98, no. March 2020 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2019.102591.

⁶ Ilan Wiesel, Wendy Steele, and Donna Houston, "Cities of care: Introduction to a special issue," *Cities* 105 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2020.102844.

⁸Bernice Fisher and Joan C. Tronto, "Towards a feminist Theory of Caring," in *Circles of care: Work and identity in women's lives*, ed. E. K. Abel and M. Nelson (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1991), 40.

⁹ Maia Green and Victoria Lawson, "Recentring care: interrogating the commodification of care," *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, no. 6 (2011).

homes, communities, professional care services, environments, infrastructures and through urban planning and design.¹⁰

The idea that we are independent individuals is challenged by theories of care which emphasise the relational and interdependent nature of humans.¹¹ As Raghuram notes, "care and responsibility challenge wider moves within public policy towards an autonomous, responsibilised self".¹² By positioning care as something that all people might practice or require rather than just those positioned as dependent. Theorists approach care as an activity that sustains the life of people, environments, and animals in cities and beyond.¹³ Importantly, care is a practice that everyone relies upon that is, as Lawson put it, "absolutely central to our individual and collective survival".¹⁴ Care as a practice might be universal, however how it is understood and practiced is context-specific.¹⁵ Pavarti Raghuram reminds us that,

"Huge variations exist in terms of duties involved in care, who pays for it, where it is situated, who regulates it (if at all), and what the relationships are through which care is mediated at each of these sites where caring occurs. Even within one site, such as the household, there can be many distinctions".¹⁶

Care is often hard, messy and difficult work.¹⁷ Care might be "practiced in contexts that are unjust and in ways that are oppressive, as care can become burdensome.¹⁸ It is important to approach care and define what "good care" looks like in ways that are historically, culturally and socially contingent.¹⁹

Scholars draw on the concept of care in multiple ways. Firstly, as a means to describe particular practices— a lens through which to explain and articulate how people are doing the everyday work of maintaining, continuing and repairing worlds by caring about, caring for, giving care, receiving care and caring with



¹⁰ Power and Williams, "Cities of care: a platform for urban geographical care research."

¹¹ Victoria Lawson, "Geographies of care and responsibility," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 97, no. 1 (2007).

¹² Parvati Raghuram, Clare Madge, and Pat Noxolo, "Rethinking responsibility and care for a postcolonial world," *Geoforum* 40 (2009): 5.

¹³ Power and Williams, "Cities of care: a platform for urban geographical care research."

¹⁴ Lawson, "Geographies of care and responsibility."

¹⁵ Parvati Raghuram, "Locating Care Ethics Beyond the Global North," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographers* 15, no. 3 (2016).

¹⁶ Raghuram, "Locating Care Ethics Beyond the Global North," 517.

¹⁷ Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

¹⁸ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*.

¹⁹ Raghuram, "Locating Care Ethics Beyond the Global North," 517.

each other.²⁰ Secondly, care is mobilised as an ethics that evaluates and envisions how cities might become more caring through exposing the inequalities, struggles and contestations around how care is practiced, valued and marginalised politically, economically and culturally (or not).^{21 22 23}

Care ethics assist us in considering our ethical responsibilities to people both proximate and distant.²⁴ They make visible the inequalities of who is doing the work of care and taking responsibility for care.²⁵ Care ethics can help us to reflect on how we can *collectively* work to make our cities more caring and use the lens of care as an aspirational goal. For example, Williams and Power ask the question with which we began this paper: *why can't cities be measured not on how creative or competitive they are, but instead by how caring they are*? ²⁶ Urban planning has a key role in achieving such an ambitious vision.

2. Care and Planning?

Planning makes it possible for people to access the key resources required for caring and has historically played an important role in shaping visions and ideas for better cities.²⁷ Recently, planning theorists have begun to explore how an ethics of care might and already are shaping urban planning practice and policy.^{28 29 30} Writing from New Zealand but drawing on examples from various locations globally, Freeman and Nel view planning as a caring profession with concerns about equity, justice, community and sustainability at the heart of planning practice.³¹ Planning has also been positioned as historically contributing to the unjust distribution of physical and social infrastructures and resources that are required for caring, such as education facilities, health facilities and public spaces.³² Writing from an American context, Binet et al., for example, explain that

²¹ Miriam Williams, "Care-full Justice in the City," *Antipode* 49, no. 3 (2017),



²⁰ Joan Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* (NYU Press: New York, 2013).

https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12279,

²² Power and Williams, "Cities of care: a platform for urban geographical care research."

²³ Angelika Gabauer et al., Care and the city: encounters with urban studies (Taylor & Francis, 2022).

²⁴ Raghuram, "Locating Care Ethics Beyond the Global North."

²⁵ Lawson, "Geographies of care and responsibility."

²⁶ Power and Williams, "Cities of care: a platform for urban geographical care research," 9.

²⁷ Andrew Binet et al., "The Urban Infrastructure of Care," *Journal of the American Planning Association* (2023), https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2022.2099955

²⁸ Christina R. Ergler, Claire Freeman, and Tess Guiney, "Pre-Schoolers' Vision for Liveable Cities: Creating 'Care-Full' Urban Environments," *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 113, (2022) https://doi.org/10.1111/tesg.12461,

²⁹ Claire Freeman and Etienne Nel, *Planning for the Caring City* (New York and London: Routledge, 2024).

³⁰ Patsy Healey, "Planning and caring: A reflection," Planning Theory 23, no. 3 (2024).

³¹ Freeman and Nel, *Planning for the Caring City*.

³² Binet et al., "The Urban Infrastructure of Care."

"Patterns of urban development and modes of planning thought from the industrial era to the present have individualized, obfuscated, and devalued the work of care and social reproduction to the detriment of racial and gender equity in cities...How urban environments shape the work of caregiving and whether they enhance or deplete people's capacities to care for one another matters for the health of urban populations, the livability of cities, and the role of cities in advancing or undermining racial, gender, and economic equity".³³

As such, planning differently, with care in mind, is an important practice that could redress the devaluing of care by planning and rectify some of the ways planning has reproduced inequities.³⁴ There are numerous examples where governments have begun to address these inequalities and been guided by ethics of care. In the following, we bring forward two examples.

3. How Care has been mobilised in planning practice

Strategies and guidelines are formal forms of governance that can be replete with care-full intentions and provide insights into how governments are enacting care. Freeman and Nel argue that governance is key to "understanding how care can be formally supported, promoted and supported in terms of policy and practice".³⁵ Practices of governance are necessarily complex, place-specific and continue to change over time. In this section we offer two place-based examples of how governments have mobilised care through planning practice. Firstly, the Connecting with Country Framework, from New South Wales, Australia, and secondly, the Madrid City of Care plan, Spain. Both cases provide insight into how plans and strategies might uniquely be informed by or incorporate context appropriate ideas of care. We offer both examples in order to illustrate the diverse, context specific ways care is shaping planning practice.

3.1 Connecting with Country Framework, New South Wales, Australia

In recent years the New South Wales (NSW) state government has been actively developing guidelines to shape built form interventions and public space design and provisioning. The *Connecting with Country framework* was developed by the NSW Government Architect who explain that it "is a guide for good practice to



³³ Binet et al., "The Urban Infrastructure of Care," 282.

³⁴ Binet et al., "The Urban Infrastructure of Care."

³⁵ Freeman and Nel, *Planning for the Caring City*, 180.

help you respond to Country when you plan, design and deliver built environment projects".³⁶ For Australian Aboriginal people the term 'Country' has special significance:

Country encompasses everything. It includes both living and non-living elements. It holds everything within the landscape, including Earth, Water and Sky Country, as well as people, animals, plants, and the stories that connect them.³⁷

All land (and water, sky and animals) in Australia whether urban and rural is considered Country, a point that has been emphasised by numerous scholars seeking to remind the planning profession of this in cities in particular.³⁸ The guideline is a governance mechanism that is seeking to ensure that "all NSW built environment projects to be developed with a Country-centred approach guided by Aboriginal people, who know that if we care for Country, Country will care for us".³⁹ Along with the framework there have been a series of webinars and training workshops that have sought to educate built environment professionals. The guideline is "informed by the wider context of First Nations rights recognition, social policy, legislation, design standards and research".⁴⁰ The Connecting with Country Framework is not prescriptive but a guideline developed to encourage the inclusion of both human-centered and country-centered practices in built environment projects.⁴¹

Care is listed as a specific value, with the holistic idea of Caring for Country deeply embedded within the framework:

> "Caring for Country is a cultural obligation that Aboriginal people undertake with a deep sense of responsibility, ownership and stewardship. Caring for Country includes caring for the wellbeing of Country's interconnected systems now and for the future.



³⁶ "Connecting with Country Framework," Better Placed, NSW Government Architect, 2024, accessed 27th May, 2024, https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-10/connecting-with-country.pdf.

³⁷ Government Architect NSW, "Connecting with Country Framework," 20.

³⁸ Libby Porter, "From an urban country to urban Country: confronting the cult of denial in Australian cities." Australian Geographer (2018), https://doi.org/10.1080/00049182.2018.1456301.

 ³⁹ Government Architect NSW, "Connecting with Country Framework," 32.
⁴⁰ Government Architect NSW, "Connecting with Country Framework," 16.
⁴¹ Government Architect NSW, "Connecting with Country Framework."

The term 'Caring for Country' is associated with a complex web of Aboriginal shared authority and management, and therefore we need to ensure we do not misappropriate it.

Reciprocity is critical to achieve mutually beneficial relationships between project and Country. If built environment projects can help Aboriginal people to fulfil their obligation and responsibility to care for Country, then Country will care for us all".⁴²

Importantly, the framework establishes that "Caring for Country is a cultural practice and responsibility that can be undertaken only by Aboriginal People".⁴³ As such, the role of non-indigenous peoples and the government is to respect, support and implement the framework in culturally appropriate ways. It suggests ways of engaging with Australian Aboriginal communities and incorporates and values indigenous knowledge systems to nurture cultural awareness and learn from Aboriginal cultural practices. It provides precinct-scale, building-scale and small-scale design considerations, actions and inspirational case studies to inform practice to produce healthier Country and communities. It was developed in response to present challenges including the loss of cultural sites, inequality, the need for reconciliation and the impact of natural disasters.⁴⁴ This guideline emphasises the importance and possibility of a Country-centred approach, which includes but is not dominated by humans.

This brief overview of this example reveals the place-based and contextual nature of how care is practiced and how planning might facilitate care or be care-full in ways that are sensitive to context and culture. The care expressed here emphasises our collective interdependence, seeks to respond to injustice and reveals the diverse and context-dependent ways care might inform planning practice.





 ⁴² Government Architect NSW, "Connecting with Country Framework," 21.
⁴³ Government Architect NSW, "Connecting with Country Framework," 25.
⁴⁴ Government Architect NSW, "Connecting with Country Framework."

3.2 Plan Madrid Ciudad De los Cuidados/ Madrid, City of Care Plan, Spain

Our second example comes from Spain, where there have been numerous instances of municipal governments being informed by care in order to revision and refashion planning policy and practice. The City Council of Madrid launched the Madrid City of Care Plan (Original: Plan Madrid Ciudad de los Cuidados) in 2015 as a strategic initiative to improve the daily lives of its residents through a community-centered approach and strengthen urban sustainability. The plan placed people at the center, emphasising collective responsibility for care and fostering an inclusive model where care was recognised as a shared social and political responsibility rather than an individual or institutional burden:⁴⁵

"As a first basic approach, the City Council must provide basic conditions so that citizens can care for, be cared for and take care of themselves, that is, it must pursue the guarantee of a minimum. This is not only the responsibility of the municipal institution, but it does not want to look the other way".⁴⁶ (Translated from Spanish by Google Translate).

The Care Plan adopted a broad definition of care that includes material and immaterial aspects of daily life, and acknowledged the importance of fulfilling basic human needs eq. access to housing, water and electricity, while also recognising the significance of emotional and relational wellbeing⁴⁷.

The plan was informed by an ethics of care framework, which is understood to challenge conventional justice-based approaches to urban policy that most often emphasise fairness and equality, in resource distribution. Differently, the ethics of care framework prioritises relationships, interdependence, and that policies This meant situational responsiveness. needed to be context-sensitive rather than one-size-fits-all.48 Urban interventions had to acknowledge vulnerability and interdependence as inherent aspects of human life, and decision-making was positioned as relational, involving affected communities in shaping policies rather than implementing top-down solutions.⁴⁹ The implications of such an approach are that care is not limited to social welfare or healthcare services; instead, it seen to be embedded across multiple



⁴⁵ FJ. Barbero, "Experiencia 1. Plan Madrid Ciudad de los Cuidados," Documentación Social 187 (2017). ⁴⁶ Barbero, "Experiencia 1. Plan Madrid Ciudad de los Cuidados," 168.

⁴⁷ "Plan Madrid Ciudad de los Cuidados," Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2017, accessed January, 2025, https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/usosdeltemps/sites/default/files/recurs/plan_madrid_cuida.pdf.

 ⁴⁸ Ayuntamiento de Madrid, "Plan Madrid Ciudad de los Cuidados."
⁴⁹ Ayuntamiento de Madrid, "Plan Madrid Ciudad de los Cuidados."

dimensions of living in a city, including the way people come together, socialise and interact with one another.⁵⁰

It is also interesting to note that the Care Plan understood care as a public and collective good. The Plan built upon a long-standing tradition in the city of grassroots mutual-aid networks that had historically addressed urban vulnerabilities, but which had been weakened over time with the emergence of market-based solutions to local care needs.⁵¹ For example, one of the objectives was to revitalise neighbourhood networks that could provide mutual aid and reduce social isolation, encourage residents to take an active role in shaping and sustaining local care practices.⁵² A key challenge identified in the plan was the erosion of social ties in modern urban environments.⁵³ Strengthening community essential ensure that care responsibilities were not bonds was to disproportionately placed on certain groups, e.g. women, informal caregivers, or marginalised communities, but were instead distributed equitably across society. The Plan integrated elements of partnerships, where local government and informal care networks could collaborate to sustain urban life and wellbeing.⁵⁴ This reinforced the city's commitment to care as both a public service and a collective responsibility, and in so doing it challenged traditional divisions between formal welfare systems and grassroots solidarity.

An interesting example of this in recent years are the grassroots mutual-aid neighbourhood networks that formed during the COVID-19 crisis.⁵⁵ Such networks provided emergency food aid, logistical support, and emotional care, offering support on urgent care needs when institutional social services were overwhelmed (see De Gasperi and Martinez for a detailed analysis).⁵⁶

As a plan designed to inform decision-making it is also relevant to mention that it was structured around four main areas of intervention, each with specific programs and policies.⁵⁷ The first area focused on public space and community



⁵⁰ Ayuntamiento de Madrid, "Plan Madrid Ciudad de los Cuidados."

⁵¹ François De Gasperi and Andrés Walliser Martinez, "Shaping caring cities: A study of community-based mutual support networks in post-pandemic Madrid," *Journal of Urban Affairs*, (2024)

https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2024.2390900.

⁵² Ayuntamiento de Madrid, "Plan Madrid Ciudad de los Cuidados."

⁵³ Ayuntamiento de Madrid, "Plan Madrid Ciudad de los Cuidados."

⁵⁴ Ayuntamiento de Madrid, "Plan Madrid Ciudad de los Cuidados."

⁵⁵ De Gasperi and Walliser Martinez, "Shaping caring cities: A study of community-based mutual support networks in post-pandemic Madrid."

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⁵⁷ De Gasperi and Walliser Martinez, "Shaping caring cities: A study of community-based mutual support networks in post-pandemic Madrid."

life, that with the ambition to design public spaces where residents could come together and socialise. The second area dealt with administrative care, training city officials in care ethics, improving the responsiveness of municipal services, and ensuring that bureaucratic processes were more accessible.⁵⁸ The third area addressed everyday life, of the emotional and social dimensions of care, including efforts to counteract loneliness, offer support on matters of mental health, and ensure community wellbeing.⁵⁹ Finally, the fourth area integrated care into the economic structure by promoting cooperative models, social enterprises, and care-centered employment policies.⁶⁰

In this it is possible to say that the Madrid's approach to care as outlined in the Madrid City of Care Plan went beyond social policy integrating elements of urban justice alongside an ethics of care.⁶¹ The integration of care networks into urban governance demonstrated how cities could build resilience by recognising vulnerability as a collective concern rather than an individual burden. Thus it offered a pioneering approach seeking to embed care ethics into urban planning, fostering a more inclusive and socially just urban future. This initiative placed Madrid at the forefront of international efforts to build cities that prioritised social cohesion. However, as the plan was launched nearly a decade ago, it remains important to assess how its principles have evolved over time and how they have impacted current policies as well as life in the city.

4. Conclusion

The concept of the caring city challenges dominant urban governance models that prioritise economic competitiveness over human wellbeing and which came to dominate most of our cities often at the expense of community wellbeing. In this paper we reflected on how an Ethics of Care framework can be used as a guiding principle in urban planning, shaping policies where there is recognition of interdependence, cohesion and of collective responsibility. By examining two cases - the Connecting with Country Framework in New South Wales and the Madrid City of Care Plan- we sought to highlight ways in which care ethics can



⁵⁸ De Gasperi and Walliser Martinez, "Shaping caring cities: A study of community-based mutual support networks in post-pandemic Madrid."

⁵⁹ De Gasperi and Walliser Martinez, "Shaping caring cities: A study of community-based mutual support networks in post-pandemic Madrid."

⁶⁰ De Gasperi and Walliser Martinez, "Shaping caring cities: A study of community-based mutual support networks in post-pandemic Madrid."

⁶¹ Ayuntamiento de Madrid, "Plan Madrid Ciudad de los Cuidados."

serve as a foundation for urban strategies that foster more inclusive, equitable, and caring cities.

As cities worldwide face multiple over-lapping crises— from climate change to social inequality—care might become a central organising principle of urban life. This requires a shift away from individualised, market-driven solutions towards collective, community-based responses that recognise care as a shared responsibility. Future research and policy efforts must critically assess the long-term impact of care-based urban strategies and explore how cities can sustain and expand these initiatives. In doing so, we may be better positioned to move closer to the vision of cities that are not only livable but also more caring—where wellbeing, justice, and sustainability are at the heart of urban governance.

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