

# The Social Sphere: Construction and Consequences of the Gendered Space of the Jewish Eruv

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**This paper examines the physical and symbolic space of the contemporary Jewish Eruv (translated: “mixing/mingling”) as a progressive gendered space and infrastructure of care.**

**The Eruv is a defined physical area symbolically extending the private realm of the ‘home’ beyond its walls into the community. Acknowledged as a legal-fiction, the Eruv provides leniencies to Orthodox Jewish communities, allowing the performance of daily activities otherwise forbidden on the Sabbath. However, the consequences are much greater; citizens are able to participate in their communities and cities while maintaining identity and traditions.**

**The Eruv loophole is a community support/catalyst, and unknown to most, the group who benefits most from its existence are women. Although the Eruv can be used by anyone, its sanctity has the greatest impact on women and mothers who care for children and the elderly, who would otherwise be isolated from the social life of the sabbath. Reflecting on the practice, this paper relates to the writings of Setha Low (Spatializing Culture) and Leslie Kern (Feminist City). Through this theoretical underpinning, related to observational fieldwork analyses and a historical survey of the Eruv, the paper will discuss an urban infrastructure as a ritual space, as a social space (legally, religiously, and culturally), and as a gendered space in cities. The work explores the idea that the Eruv can be feminist architecture. The Eruv allows for gathering, for its users to share a meal, stroll outside, and be social in ways that would otherwise be impossible. The paper presents “Eruv urbanism” as an infrastructure of care; the creation of a safe social space that includes everyone, even if it is not used by everyone, and offers lessons for plurality in cities.**

## PROVIDING SPACE

*Who are cities designed for?*

In Western architectural education, practice, and pedagogy, it has been historically focused around the white, able-bodied, cis-gendered man.<sup>1</sup> However, we are now, finally, in a time of reckoning. The #MeToo movement, the murder of George

Floyd in Minneapolis—one of many instances of ongoing police brutality against Black communities—and the COVID-19 pandemic, are a few of the major events that have helped give momentum to a sociopolitical revolution. These events have also signaled the need for changes in architecture and urbanism; questions of who is considered in the design of space, and in turn who ends up excluded. The patriarchal city emerges from a singular perspective of power and privilege. It seeks efficiency through regulation and is a space without leniency. Foremost, it sees the needs of marginalized and vulnerable populations as an exceptional burden upon the development of the city. These systemic operations create a polarizing dichotomy in the city; a separation between those included and excluded is formed. Consequently, this also defines who does or does not belong, who is valued and who is a burden. Although the term “city” etymologically relates to the inclusive space of the “citizen” (whomever that may be), our urban environments exist in extreme conditions of bias, with many gatekeepers and stakeholders controlling our spaces under the guise of “security,” “comfort,” and “hygiene.” However, these rationales often favour those in power, and have little consideration for the impact they have on those who are excluded. Although cities are built and formed, it is essential to understand that the social production of space is intrinsically tied to the physical production of space, and who therefore is included in its midst, regardless of body, gender, culture, or religion.<sup>2</sup>

Leslie Kern makes a case in her book “Feminist City” that the city and its people exist within the framework of a man-made world.<sup>3</sup> In order to claim space, the participants of the city must understand how to value infrastructures of care, or in her words design a “care-full” city, to make space for women and marginalized groups:

Women still experience the city through a set of barriers—physical, social, economic, symbolic—that shape their daily lives in ways that are invisible to men, because their own set of experiences means they rarely encounter them. This means that the primary decision makers in the city, who are still mostly men, are making choices about everything from urban economic policy to housing design, school placement to bus seating, policing to snow removal, with no knowledge, let alone concern for, how these decisions affect women.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 1. Manifestations of the Contemporary Eruv Boundary, New York 2016. Image by Author.

The city has been set up to support ideas of the “normative” user, and a de-centered approach is necessary to focus on the margins instead of the mainstream. One of Jane Jacobs’ quotes comes to mind – “Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.”<sup>5</sup> Jacob’s conviction hopes for the possibility of an ideal inclusive city. However, Jacobs emphasizes that cities merely have the *potential* to provide these places and sites of belonging; achieving such an ideal requires both bottom-up and top-down actions that consider the multiplicity of voices in our built environment. Her idealization is far from reality. That doesn’t mean the *ability* to achieve this sort of urbanity is unreachable; it just means that more work is still needed to *have* everyone be considered equal.

So how could we shift the status-quo? The best place to start is to assess these fundamental needs, and seek out examples of how they are being met in our cities. This can lead to learning, and amplification of particular modes of inclusive practice within the city. One particular example is the Jewish Eruv: a sacred territory used by orthodox communities on the Sabbath in order to perform daily activities within the city that would otherwise

be forbidden.<sup>6</sup> The Eruv is an infrastructure that specifically addresses the role of women in space and prioritizes inclusion within the framework of the orthodox practice. The Eruv is a “care-full” urban domain that provides, creates affordances, and produces spaces of appearance for its users. Although it is, ironically, unorthodox to consider an orthodox religious spatial practice as forward thinking in terms of feminist space, the Eruv’s existence is dependent on the plurality of the city. Although established as a religious practice, the Eruv is urban in every way; an infrastructure of care layered onto the heteronormative space of the city.

**WOMEN AND THE ERUV**

The Jewish Eruv (translated literally to “mixing/mingling space”) is a defined physical area symbolically extending the private realm of the ‘home’ beyond its walls into the community. Jewish communities build these boundaries themselves, establishing them through proposals, negotiations and a lease signed with the city; a space designed by people, not architects. Made of commonplace materials: fishing wire, timber, existing walls, and telephone posts, etc, the Eruv blends into its surroundings,

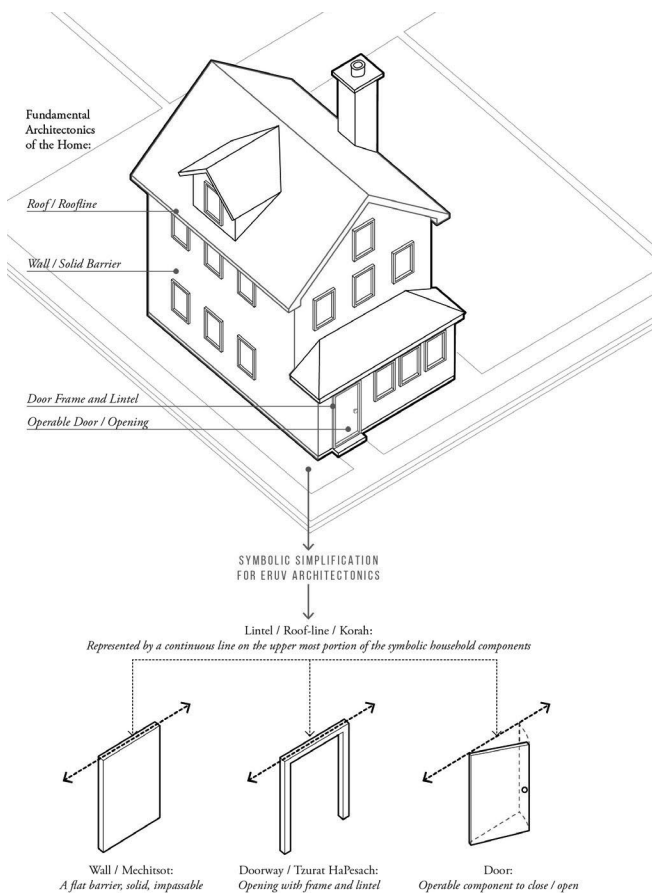


Figure 2. Symbolic Reinterpretation of the Home. Image by Author.

encompassing portions, or even entire cities, yet remains virtually invisible to those unaware of its sacredness<sup>7</sup>.

In the countless texts written about the relationship between women and Jewish space, religion, and practice, very few make direct connections between women and the Eruv. Within orthodox practice, women are linked to the private realm of the home as their spatial domain, lesser so the city. Most texts portray women as domestically oriented beings. Women in Jewish orthodox practice have long supported typical gender roles in the nuclear household. Women and mothers stay home to take care of family; they cook, they serve, and men tend to represent the working and social aspects of a household. Women maintain domestic tradition while husbands, brothers and fathers venture out into the public sphere. However, this is where the Eruv intervenes. Although it was not conceived as a feminist architecture, its existence provides affordances to mothers and women; a space of forgiveness and belonging that begins to break down the barriers of the classic gender roles within the religious practice.

The core of this paper's argument looks at the leniencies provided by the Eruv on the Sabbath, and how those leniencies

affect the embodied space of women in the orthodox practice. On the seventh day of the week, according to Judaism, followers must refrain from work. The day of rest, Shabbat (to cease), is governed by a strict set of rules that demand abstinence from all forms of labor including the use of electronics, driving, cooking, or tending to business affairs.<sup>8</sup> The rules of the Sabbath go as far as to limit persons from pressing buttons on elevators or crosswalks, lighting a fire, using a telephone, wristwatch, or public transportation, or even carrying items in their pockets, hands, or arms.<sup>9</sup>

Although practiced out of faith and devotion, these religious observances can be severely limiting and unmanageable for a portion of the community who wish to enjoy and partake in the day of rest. The prohibited act of carrying is perhaps the most difficult to observe. From the house to the street, individuals cannot carry books, bags, keys, medicine or even their own babies. Strollers and wheelchairs cannot be pushed, children cannot be carried, bags with diapers or belongings must be left at home. As it can be read: the sabbath often means women and mothers are homebound to care for their family and excluded from the social experience of the day of rest. Traditionally, the sabbath can be read as exclusionary, as it enforces the ideals of the nuclear family and their associated gender roles.

But, there is an exception to the Sabbath rules, one that informs the establishment of the Eruv loophole. Individuals may carry and perform the basic necessities of work in a *reshus hayachid* (private domain), such as the home. What can be performed in these realms is still limited, but within a private domain individuals are allowed to attend to affairs that are required for the health and well-being of their family. This specifically applies to the act of carrying. The establishment of the Eruv is an extension of this private domain in a symbolic and physical way – extending the household into the city where women can participate in the everyday life of the city while maintaining religious tradition.<sup>10</sup> A symbolic house, the components of the Eruv boundary are reinterpreted parts of the home: fishing line or string for a roof that connect thin wood or steel posts for walls, and the space in-between the openings into the private community dwelling. The consequence is an open, permeable boundary that establishes community, maintains tradition, and yet allows interaction with new environments and other cultures. Although the Eruv can be used by anyone, its sanctity has the greatest impact on women and mothers who care for children and the elderly, who would otherwise be isolated from the social life of the sabbath.

In this symbolic reading of space, the city becomes a shared household for all within its midst, and in turn the house and its privacy extends itself into the public sphere of the street. It is a space of security and also of exposure. The threshold between inside and outside blur as the house opens to the street to become an infrastructure of care and, fundamentally, a place of shelter. Although the Eruv does not entirely dismantle the



Figure 3. Orthodox Women in Jerusalem Preparing for Shabbos. Image by Author.

gendered roles in the city and within orthodox practice, it does “let women and girls take up space and make relations on their own terms”.<sup>11</sup> Because of the Eruv, women are given agency within the city.

### THE DOMESTIC CITY

The home is the most common type of private realm in Judaism, where individuals can perform the bare necessities of carrying and working to take care of themselves and their family. The goal of the Eruv is to *halachically* (legally by Jewish law) enclose the perimeters of Jewish areas within cities so they can be considered one large *reshus hayachid*, by transforming public space into a symbolic private realm.

The purpose of the Eruv can be understood simply as an extended space of lenience. But, its intricacies, services, and consequences as a negotiating urban layer go far beyond its Talmudic purpose to respond to religious needs and personal desires.

Eruvin (plural) exist at many scales. They can surround an individual house and its lawn or yard; they can enclose a courtyard, a series of civic blocks, a community, or even entire portions of a city. City-scale Eruvin have long presented opportunities and challenges within the Jewish tradition and how domestic practices interface with the social demands of city life.

Traditional gender roles, and the sacrificial burden associated with them, are an accepted part of Orthodox life. The rules and

traditions of an observant life require reflection and humility based on the commandments of the Torah for the observation of Shabbat. Women remaining at home and men attending synagogue prevents breaking the sabbath laws, and the home is seen as the only space required to support a family. Practicing males can leave their prayer shawls and scriptures at the synagogue, and easily walk, attend services, and be outside the home without concern of breaking the commandments in place. Women can tend to children and their own duties while remaining inside the house.<sup>12</sup>

The Eruv is written into the Talmud, and evidence of city scale Eruv practices date back as early as the Mishnaic period.<sup>13</sup> For nearly two millennia, Jewish communities remained satisfied with the gendered status quo as a way to abide by the Jewish commandments in the Torah, and many sects still remain dedicated to this way of life. Orthodox Judaism was established in 1851 to maintain these values and roles in reaction to the radical changes presented by Reform Jewish sects.<sup>14</sup> But, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries challenged the practice of the Orthodox communities, specifically creating a gap for women between their traditional gender role in the faith and the modern demands necessary to maintain their livelihood.<sup>15</sup>

Mass immigration of Jewish communities from Europe to North America began in 1840. Life in North America was entirely different for women than it had ever been before; women were expected to work as well as care for family, and their contexts,



Figure 4. Orthodox Men on the Sabbath, Walking beneath an Eruv Pole, Jerusalem. Image by Author.

social life and communities were far more diverse. Living conditions were tight, households settled in tenement houses and apartments where families of 6 or more would share a single bedroom. The home was no longer the same, and neither was the community.

The Sabbath still bound women to their homes to care for their children while men could engage in the active social life of the city. Disconnected from their European roots, Jewish communities struggled to stay connected. Life in North America forced women to choose between segregation and assimilation; either remaining in their traditional role, causing economic hardship on their families or breaking their religious practice to be active participants in the city, economy, and neighborhood. Women could not engage in the community like their fathers, husbands, and brothers if they wished to remain in the practice and were not even allowed to leave their homes with a child in their arms without breaking the prohibited laws of carrying.

Historically, city scale Eruvin appropriated city walls that existed around city centers in Europe to create a large private domain for its community.<sup>16</sup> The bounded nature of the city created a symbolic enclosed private space. But North American cities didn't have city walls or fortifications that offered such an opportunity. The assumed pre-existing nature of the Eruv was no longer an option. With the community facing isolation, the historic concept of the Eruv was reinterpreted as an answer to how traditional practice could negotiate the demands of the modern world. A modified form of Eruv was introduced into cities globally to serve the congregations who were resettling. Although symbolic in its purpose, the Eruv is, and has been, a physical artifact presented in cities, changing most notably relative to the gender challenges of large metropolises in the nineteenth century onward.

The contemporary Eruv approached the city in a new way. It looked at its physical infrastructures as an opportunity for appropriated contextual boundaries (such as fencing, river walls, raised rail lines, etc.), and using lightweight construction materials (string, fishing line, 2x4s) to bridge between such artifacts to make an enclosed symbolic privatized domain. The Eruv is resourceful and is a metaphor for the life that it creates. The Eruv helps to maintain tradition while assimilating into the public qualities of the city, and the Eruv creates affordances in space. And more specifically, the contemporary Eruv had to address the participation and appearance of those (specifically women) now directly excluded from space, when previously everyone was, by default, included within city walls.

As both symbolic and physical space, the Eruv is its own form of feminist urbanism.<sup>17</sup> For women, the contemporary Eruv introduced a leniency through understanding; to allow for action and appearance, to afford forgiveness in the face of new practices, to allow its community to connect with others outside its practice.<sup>18</sup> Its empowerment is almost entirely symbolic in

physical space and created through action. In most cases, the Eruv is simply a fishing line connecting a series of poles around the periphery of a community. For the women who need and use the space, it is through faith and confidence that they decide to step outside their homes on the day of rest and shed the expectation set out for them in their gender roles. Purposefully, these Eruv boundaries are “invisible” and unnoticeable to the untrained eye, integrated subtly into their surroundings, experienced through knowledge rather than the senses, and of value to one community living among others. By allowing for the performance of necessary activities on the day of rest, the Eruv inherently enables a community to remain active in their spiritual practice and provides freedom to assimilate without religious fault. But what defines the Eruv so uniquely within the realm of Orthodox practice is that it is fundamentally rooted in practices of plurality.<sup>19</sup> From appropriating infrastructure to allowing all members to socialize within diverse contexts with many different people, it always recognizes the “other” to validate its existence.

Alongside the establishment of the contemporary Eruv came the establishment of new female Jewish organizations in North America.<sup>20</sup> However, most still encouraged traditional gender roles. The *Jewish Home Beautiful* (published by a union of sisterhood committees of the Conservative synagogue) emphasized “the home as the women’s domain, the central sphere of her Jewish activity for her husband and family and urged her to make of this, “the grandest of all institutions,” “a miniature temple”.”<sup>21,22</sup> Undoubtedly, the household as a private domain is a sacred space in orthodox practice. And the Eruv, as a leniency, then makes women empowered within civic space. Extending their domain out onto the streets and into the public realm, in turn, makes the city their grandest institution, and in a small triumphant sense, gives them control and territory over the city. The city therefore becomes a space of care and allows women and children to have agency in the complex contexts in which they live.

### DISMANTLING THE HOME

Feminist theorists and geographers may not consider the Eruv a true feminist space, and that is also not the claim of this paper. The Eruv supports many of the ideas about the nuclear family, it still upholds orthodox religious practices that separate men and women and define gender roles, it does very little to shift the privilege men feel within space, and typically these boundaries are organized by the Rabbis (who are mostly men, not women) as they assess the need for their community. However, the Eruv does create freedom in the name of the vulnerable, it allows forgiveness and grace in the city, and recognizes the desire for all and anyone to participate equally in their urban environment on the Sabbath. Through these values, the Eruv embodies several of the ideals outlined in Kern’s *Feminist City*:

A feminist city must be one where barriers – physical and social – are dismantled, where all bodies are welcome and

accommodated. A feminist city must be care centered, not because women should remain largely responsible for care work, but because the city has the potential to spread care work more evenly. A feminist city must look to the creative tools that women have always used to support one another and find ways to build that support into the very fabric of the urban world.<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, the established territory of the Eruv breaks down other boundaries through its existence and decenters conditions of privilege in the built environment. Through embodied space, the action of individuals both in and outside the orthodox practice inform spatial plurality.

Embodied space emphasizes the importance of the body as a present, living and physical entity in space—as a lived experience and a center of agency—“a location for speaking and acting in the world”.<sup>24</sup> As described by anthropologist Setha Low, people are both the producers and products of space, tied to the action of our own individual bodies and that of the larger cultural, economic, and political bodies of which we are a part. The Eruv demands a physical and spatial occupation, one that invites the user to wander, to explore, to be vulnerable, to trust, and to experience the new and unexpected. Through this, the Eruv becomes a space of action and appearance as defined by Hannah Arendt. As a space of action, the Eruv relies on plurality (the consideration and acceptance of the “other”). The Eruv’s existence is only as good as the belief and faith of its user, but its existence is equally tied to the diverse contexts in which it situates itself as well as the boundary it creates. As a space of “mixing/mingling/unification,” the Eruv blends cultures and communities, but it also blends space to allow for more participants, more people, and more opportunity through its symbolic space. Its value is found in the physical commitment of space and its actors, and the agency they take through its opportunities. Perhaps the most feminist quality about the Eruv is that it provides care and offers (without force) belonging and freedom in space to those seeking it. It is not a space exclusive to anyone; it is a symbolic home with its doors wide open. It is in the recognition of plurality that the Eruv can be deemed a conscious method for fabricating inclusive community space. Arendt describes this relationship as tied to action:

To act means to take initiative, to introduce [...] the unexpected into the world, it also means that it is not something that can be done in isolation from others, that is, independently of the presence of a plurality of actors who from their different perspectives can judge the quality of what is being enacted.<sup>25</sup>

Arendt’s spaces of appearance (where the *polis*, or “city” comes into existence) also play a role in the Eruv. Spaces of appearance are “where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things, but to make their appearance explicitly”.<sup>26</sup> Spaces of appearance call

for actuality, for truth, but also for deliberation. In conjunction with Kern’s writings on the *Feminist City* calling for the care work and creative tools women use to be brought into the city, one can imagine that the decentering of practice and the gendered empowerment of the Eruv offers opportunity for reflection and public deliberation. The Eruv, although a symbolic private space, requires one to dwell within the public sphere, to engage and participate, to be a part of the political life and be seen as an individual who engages in such a leniency for a better and more powerful life. Afterall, “leniencies” are forms of compassion, and the Eruv exists as a symbolic leniency.

However important compassion may be, Leslie Kern reflects on how we must improve our cities in more actionable ways, seeing the benefits of inclusion and consideration being far reaching:

It’s clear the time has come to decenter the heterosexual, nuclear family in everything from housing design to transportation strategies, neighbourhood planning to urban zoning. This means that city planners and architects can’t take the white, able-bodied cis man as the default subject and imagine everyone else as a variation on the norm. Instead, the margins must become the centre. Although the lives of an aging widow in the inner suburbs and low-income lesbian moms renting in a gentrifying neighbourhood will look different, interventions to improve access to city services and amenities for one will likely benefit the other.<sup>27</sup>

Although Kern does not speak here about religious practices, or more specifically about Jewish Orthodoxy, they too are included in the plurality of difference. The Eruv is deeply embedded in a religious practice unknown to most, but it affords presence to women, a community and a freedom that would otherwise be missing from the multiplicity of our urban environments.

Women in Jewish Orthodox practice have long held the responsibility of maintaining tradition. From the household where they raise their children, to the womb for which it is believed that Jewish life is born in the world. The Eruv supports women, and continues their work; it is a space that provides the opportunity for Jewish life and practice to continue in the contemporary world. Entering the Eruv, possibility and an acknowledgement of our human ability to be among others is celebrated. “Eruv urbanism” is an infrastructure of care; the creation of a secure, social space that includes everyone, even if it is not used by everyone. Simply, the Eruv offers lessons for celebrating and designing for plurality in cities; through policy and construction. Through this approach the territory of the Eruv is inherently compassionate. A characteristic that opens doors, provides opportunity, and empowers all individuals to take hold of the city.

This paper intends to open a broader conversation surrounding the intersections of feminist urbanism, as well as the intentional inclusion and use of affordances in architectural practice.



Figure 5. The Manifestation of the Eruv Fishing-Wire Roofline. Image by Author.



The hope is that, through contributing to this conversation, affordances in urbanism can be understood as both actions that are seen and not seen. The future trajectory of this research seeks to expand upon these theorizations of the Eruv as a feminist act by grounding itself among additional movements pertaining to Feminist Urbanism, including the work of Jennifer Bloomer, MUF architecture/art, Karen Barad, and the Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative. As architects, an understanding of “care-full” approaches is urged; to consider broader networks of people, places, and cultures, and to migrate away from singular solutions to one project or site. Planning and design practices look for exceptions or unique circumstances to alter space to provide affordances, instead of seeing affordances as a standard requirement for placemaking. “Care-full” approaches consider the ways in which many dwell and live and move together through the everyday. Inclusivity and plurality exceed tolerance and require active goals to make people and groups feel comfortable, have dignity and the opportunity to flourish. The Eruv is one particular example of considerate and considered architecture. It offers opportunities to rethink the extent of our care (physical, emotional, or symbolic) when addressing the patriarchal city.

20. Pamela S Nadell, “Women in American Judaism,” in *Women and Judaism: New Insights and Scholarship*, ed. Frederick E Greenspahn (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), pp. 155-181, 157.
21. *Ibid.*, 157.
22. Cited in Jenna Weissman Joselit, *New York’s Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 97.
23. Kern, *Feminist City*, 54.
24. Low, *Spatializing Culture*, 94.
25. Maurizio Passerin D’Entreves, “Hannah Arendt.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. July 27, 2006. Accessed February 10, 2015. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arendt/>.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Kern, *Feminist City*, 54.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Leslie Kern, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World* (London, UK: Verso, 2021), 54.
2. Setha M. Low, *Spatializing Culture: The Ethnography of Space and Place* (Abingdon, OXO: Routledge, 2017), 3-4.
3. Kern, *Feminist City*.
4. *Ibid.*, 5.
5. Jane Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (London, UK: The Bodley Head, 2020), 238.
6. Marcus Jastrow, *Sefer Ha-milim: Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature*. (New York: Judaica Treasury, 2004), 1075.
7. Piper Bernbaum, “The Atlas of Legal Fictions: Discovering the Implicit and Invisible Boundaries of the Jewish Eruvin,” M.Arch diss., (University of Waterloo, 2016), 1.
8. Shabbat (Hebrew), Shabbos (Yiddish) and the Sabbath (English) are interchangeable terms in the Jewish faith used to describe Judaism’s day of rest on the seventh day of the week to commemorate the creation of the heavens and the earth by God in six days. Shabbat is a day of rest from work and business observed every week, beginning at sunset on Friday evening until sunset on Saturday evening. Observance of Shabbat is the fourth of the Ten Commandments given to the Israelites by God after their exodus from Egypt.
9. Bernbaum, “The Atlas of Legal Fictions”, 1.
10. *Ibid.*, 32.
11. Kern, *Feminist City*, 86.
12. Bernbaum, “The Atlas of Legal Fictions”, 3.
13. Adam Mintz, “Halakhah in America: The History of City Eruvin, 1894-1962.” (PhD diss., New York University, 2011), 73.
14. “Patheos Library” Orthodox Judaism Origins, Orthodox Judaism History, Orthodox Judaism Beliefs. 2008-2016. Accessed January 17, 2016. <http://www.patheos.com/Library/Orthodox-Judaism>.
15. Bernbaum, “The Atlas of Legal Fictions”, 3.
16. Mintz, “Halakhah in America,” 3.
17. Bernbaum, “The Atlas of Legal Fictions”, 2.
18. For further reading on spaces of action and appearance, see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
19. Plurality, the consideration of the “other” or “outsider”.