Negotiating Domesticity
Spatial productions of gender in modern architecture

Edited by Hilde Heynen and Gülsüm Baydar

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The home is the very place where the intricate relations between architecture, gender, and domesticity become visible. This book investigates the multi-layered themes evoked by the interconnections between these terms.

Despite Modern Architecture’s prominent emphasis on housing, the point is often made that modern art and architecture were about the suppression, rather than the glorification of domesticity. The contention of the authors, however, is that the modern era marked the rise of a new sense of domesticity that developed simultaneously with re-definitions of gender roles and that led to unprecedented articulations of sexuality with domestic space. The essays brought together in this book address this issue through interdisciplinary contributions that enrich architectural theory and history with sociological, anthropological, philosophical, and psychoanalytical approaches. They explore the relationship between modern domestic spaces and sexed subjectivities in a broad range of geographical locations of Western modernity.

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Acknowledgments

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Modernity and domesticity
Tensions and contradictions

Hilde Heynen

Modernity and homelessness

The literature of modernity focuses on the idea of change and discontinuity, stating that in a modern condition change is paramount and nothing can remain fixed or stable. The basic motivation for this struggle for change is located in a desire for progress and emancipation, which can only be fulfilled if the containment within the stifling conventions of the past can be overcome. Thus, the usual depictions of modernity present it as a heroic pursuit of a better life and a better society, which is basically at odds with stability, tradition, and continuity. Marshall Berman states that:

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.¹

To be modern thus means to participate in a quest for betterment of oneself and one’s environment, leaving behind the certainties of the past. Inevitably, this journey results in the ambivalent experience of the gratifications of personal development on the one hand and nostalgia for what is irretrievably lost on the other.

Several feminist authors have pointed out that such, by now well-diffused, theoretical approaches tend to gender modernity as male. This is not
only due to the intimate connection between modernity and critical reason – reason being a capacity that Western philosophy has invariably attributed to males more than to females, as, for example, Genevieve Lloyd has shown. The gendering of modernity as male also resides in the heroes that figure in its narratives and in the specific sites that they occupy. As Rita Felski argues, the exemplary heroes of Berman’s text – Faust, Marx, Baudelaire – are not only symbols of modernity, pursuing ideals of progress, rationality, or authenticity in a constant battle with a world tied down by irrational beliefs and corrupt mechanisms of power. They also embody new forms of male subjectivity which manifest themselves in the public arena of city streets and political discourses, seemingly free from any familial and communal ties. They thus function as markers of both modernity and masculinity, and this results in a clearly gendered, and hence biased, account of the nature of modernity.

The conceptualization itself of modernity as embodying the struggle for progress, rationality, and authenticity also bears gendered overtones. In as far as modernity means change and rupture, it seems to imply, necessarily, the leaving of home. A metaphorical “homelessness” indeed is often considered the hallmark of modernity. For a philosopher such as Heidegger it is clear that modern man has lost the knowledge of “how to dwell.” Theodor Adorno is of the same opinion: “Dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible. . . . The house is past.” Although Adorno’s perspective is very different from Heidegger’s, both philosophers share the fundamental assumption that modernity and dwelling are at odds and cannot be reconciled. The metaphor is also recurrent in sociological studies, as can be inferred from The Homeless Mind. Modernization and Consciousness by Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner. Since the home is associated with women and femininity, the metaphor of homelessness reinforces the identification of modernity with masculinity. It seems as if the vicissitudes of modernity are cast into a scenario which ascribes the active and generative roles to the masculine qualities of reason, dominance, and courage, while leaving the more passive and resistant roles to the feminine capacities of nurturing and caring. Agency, consequently, is most of all located with predominantly male heroes venturing out to conquer the unknown, whereas it is generally the role of women to embody modernity’s “other” – tradition, continuity, home. This scenario is, to a large extent, also the script for modernism.

**The gender of modernism**

“Modernism,” in its broadest sense, can be understood as the generic term for those theoretical and artistic ideas about modernity that embrace the experience of the new and that aim to foster the evolution towards a brighter future. Typically, however, these movements were part of high culture, and tended to be critical of mass culture and the homogenizing effects
of modernization. Modernist discourses have thus often hailed the struggle for authenticity and integrity, and have denigrated the needs for comfort and consolation that were seen as characteristic for a petit-bourgeois mentality. This polarization of values, that underscored the distinction between art and kitsch, bears gendered overtones, as is pointed out by Andreas Huyssen:

It is indeed striking to observe how the political, psychological and aesthetic discourse around the turn of the century consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities.7

In many ways, the discourses and practices of modernism favored masculine qualities, and were embodied by male representatives. This is, for instance, confirmed by Richard McCormick who comments that in the New Objectivity “the gender of the subject who seemingly produced it, the subject it glorified and to whom it was addressed, was obviously, explicitly, indeed defensively masculine.”8

Not surprisingly, then, the great modernist artists, authors, and architects are predominantly male, and the canons in the different fields comprise only a limited amount of women – even if the last decades saw important contributions by feminist scholars who attempted to reinscribe women artists, authors, and architects into the histories of the visual arts, literature, and architecture.9 Of course, the dominating role of men in these fields was precipitated by the social and cultural conditions of the times, which encouraged men to follow their dreams and warned women not to stray too far from accepted patterns of life. We should not underestimate, however, to which extent the legitimating discourses of modernism reinforced the assumed superiority of masculine qualities over feminine features and, consequently, facilitated the access of men into the roles of heroes and leaders, to the detriment of their female counterparts. In the architectural discourse, for example, it was quite common around the turn of the century to see nineteenth-century eclecticism being condemned for its “effeminate” traits. Architects such as Hermann Muthesius, Adolf Loos, or Henry van de Velde advocated the virtues of simplicity, authenticity, and integrity, contrasting these sober and “virile” qualities with the sentimentality, ornamentation, and ostentatious pretensions associated with eclecticism.10 Hendrik Petrus Berlage called for a modern architecture that would embody the sublime – a form of beauty, he explains, that differs from the more common quality of pleasing the eye, just like male beauty differs from female beauty. The sublime is based upon spiritual strivings, asceticism, and a totally free consciousness. These higher ideals,
he states, should lead architecture to a new style based on constructive principles, necessity, and sobriety.\textsuperscript{11} A rather late variant of this gendered outlook on modern architecture can be found in Ayn Rand’s \textit{Fountainhead} which depicts the male architect-hero as uniquely possessing the qualities of integrity, virility, and authenticity that modern architecture requires.\textsuperscript{12}

In a move consistent with this analytical scheme, Christopher Reed states, in the introduction to his edited volume \textit{Not at Home. The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture}, that there is a growing divergence of domesticity and modernism. He sees modernism’s association with the idea of the avant-garde as the main reason for this divergence. He argues that, in as far as modernists conceived of themselves as “avant-garde,” they had a built-in tendency to being undomestic:

As its military-derived name suggests, the avant-garde (literally “advance guard”) imagined itself away from home, marching toward glory on the battlefields of culture. [. . .] From the Victorian drawing-room with its étagères full of trinkets to the twentieth-century tract house with its mass-produced paintings, the home has been positioned as the antipode to high art. Ultimately, in the eyes of the avant-garde, being undomestic came to serve as a guarantee of being art.\textsuperscript{13}

For Reed, it is clear that architects such as Loos or Le Corbusier were deeply hostile to the conventional understanding of home, which they associated with sentimental hysteria and dusty conservatism. They advocated a new way of living in which residences would be reduced to machines for living that would offer their inhabitants only the barest minimum of decoration.

It should be noted, however, that Reed’s understanding of the avant-garde in terms of heroism belongs to a rather specific interpretation of the notion of avant-garde. This interpretation, formulated by authors such as Renato Poggioli and Matei Calinescu, stresses its radical nature, its urge to battle against tradition and convention, its dynamism and activism, its restless quest for annihilating the superfluous, which sometimes ends in a nihilistic gesture seeking purification in absolute nothingness.\textsuperscript{14} This interpretation of the avant-garde had been dominant until the 1980s.

More recently, however, a competing viewpoint stresses other aspects. This viewpoint is theorized by Peter Bürger. According to this author, the avant-garde movements in the first half of the twentieth century were not so much concentrating on purely aesthetical issues, but were concerned to abolish the autonomy of art as an institution.\textsuperscript{15} Their aim was to put an end to the existence of art as something separate from everyday life, of art, that is, as an autonomous domain that has no real impact on the social system.
Movements such as futurism, Dadaism, constructivism, and surrealism acted according to the principle of “Art into Life!,” objecting against the traditional boundaries that separate artistic practices from everyday life. Andreas Huyssen has taken up this understanding of the avant-garde in order to differentiate between avant-garde and modernism. For him, the avant-garde is not the most radical “spearhead” of modernism, but rather formulates an alternative for modernism. Whereas modernism insists on the autonomy of the work of art, is hostile towards mass culture and separates itself from the culture of everyday life, the historical avant-garde aimed at developing an alternative relationship between high art and mass culture, and thus should be distinguished from modernism.16

If the avant-garde can be alternately understood as either heroic (pursuing the unknown) or transgressive (oriented towards the everyday), modernism’s qualification as consistently masculine is problematized too. Bonnie Kim Scott, for example, states that the masculine gendering of modernism in literature was the result of specific historic circumstances:

Modernism as we were taught it at mid-century was perhaps halfway to truth. It was unconsciously gendered masculine. The inscriptions of mothers and women, and more broadly of sexuality and gender, were not adequately decoded, if detected at all. […] Deliberate or not, this is an example of the politics of gender. Typically, both the authors of original manifestos and the literary historians of modernism took as their norm the small set of its male participants, who were quoted, anthologized, taught and consecrated as geniuses.17

As a countermove, Scott’s critical anthology of modernist literature presents a series of texts whose choice undermines the narrow constriction of modernism to experimental, audience-challenging and language-focused writing. Her choice enlarges the scope of modernism, showing that a great many voices added to it and that it should rather be described as polyphonic, mobile, interactive, and sexually charged. Scott thus (re)constructs modernism as feminine rather than masculine.

In fact, the dovetailing between modernism and femininity is not so new. As Vivian Liska argues, there is a long tradition, starting with Charles Baudelaire and Eugen Wolff, that attributes feminine qualities to “la modernité” or “die Moderne.” The allegorical female is evoked by a lot of authors around the turn of the last century to describe the ephemeral and enigmatic aspects of modernity. In high modernism – in Virginia Woolf, for instance – one also finds references to a writing style that is thought to articulate a feminine psyche. The most important elaboration of this topos is probably that in recent
poststructuralist theories of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigary, and Helene Cixous. They practice and advocate an “écriture féminine” which bears strikingly modernist characteristics, in that they reject linearity and transparency, but rather write in a way that underscores the ambivalent and paradoxical character of language, thus evoking a multiplicity and endless dissemination of meaning. The key-metaphor which, for them, harbors the promise of a subversive culture capable of undermining the dominant phallogocentrism is the metaphor of the feminine.18

What we encounter here as a contradiction between different feminist interpretations of modernism – the one depicting it as “masculine,” the other putting the “feminine” at its core – comes forth from a basic split between two tendencies which can roughly be identified as a critical-emancipatory tendency, largely incorporated by Anglo-American authors, versus a poststructuralist, French feminism.19 The first one stands in the tradition of left-wing, liberal thought, is concerned with empirically investigated mechanisms of discrimination, and focuses on historical, social, and cultural factors of inequality for women. It is politically rooted and oriented towards the emancipation of real-life (female) subjects. The second one rather refers to psycho-analytical and linguistic theories, and favors most of all the analysis of discourses and their symbolic implications. It is philosophically rooted and oriented towards the analysis of subjectivities as they appear in a diversity of practices and discourses. This second tendency is concerned first of all with unraveling, deconstructing and criticizing the conventional hierarchies between the masculine and the feminine. Given these very different backgrounds and the fact that both strands of feminism have developed quite independently from one another, it is hardly surprising that they have tended to operate on different platforms, addressing different issues. Nevertheless, the last decades have witnessed several attempts to mediate between them and to effectuate a certain rapprochement.20

The cult of domesticity
If one of the perspectives discussed above tends to establish the gendering of modernity as masculine through its opposition with feminine domesticity, a focus on domesticity itself on the other hand reveals a rather different mode of interconnection. In tracing the history and meanings of domesticity, one sees that there was a direct connection between the emergence of the domestic ideal on the one hand and the rise of industrial capitalism and imperialism on the other.

Walter Benjamin observes that the private individual makes his entry on the scene of history in the early nineteenth century, at the moment that, for the first time, his home becomes opposed to his place of work.21 Indeed, until then the house was not a private shelter for the members of a
small family, but rather a large structure that comprised workshops as well as residential accommodation. It did not only house husband, wife, and children, but also members of the extended family, protégés, and servants. Before the nineteenth century, the house was far less part of the private/public dichotomy that we have come to associate with it, nor did it bear the clearly gendered overtones that suggest that the house first of all belongs to the mother.22

Domesticity therefore is a construction of the nineteenth century. The term refers to a whole set of ideas that developed in reaction to the division between work and home. These ideas stressed the growing separation between male and female spheres, which was justified by assumptions regarding the differences in “nature” between the genders, as, for instance, in this famous quote from John Ruskin:

the woman’s power is for rule, not for battle, – and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision. [. . .] The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial; [. . .] But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her [. . .] need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offense. This is the true nature of home – it is the place of Peace.23

As a consequence of their different natures, men were considered fit to take their place in the public sphere of work and power, whereas women were relegated to the private realm of the home, which they were assumed to turn into a place of rest and relaxation for their husbands, fathers, or brothers.

When men left their places of work within the house in order to establish workshops, factories, and offices as the main sites of economic production, a whole ideology thus came into being which justified the gender division between breadwinners on the one hand and caretakers on the other. This ideology is articulated in terms of gender, space, work, and power. It prescribes rather precise (be it changing) norms regarding the essential requirements of family life, the needs of children, the proper ways of arranging food, cloths and furniture, the care of body and health, the best ways to balance work, leisure, and family activities, the need for cleanliness and hygiene. Domesticity can therefore be discussed in terms of legal arrangements, spatial settings, behavioral patterns, social effects, and power constellations – giving rise to a variety of discourses that comment upon it or criticize it.24

In the US the cult of domesticity gave rise to what Ann Douglas has called a “feminization of culture.” Around the second half of the nineteenth century, the growing number of educated middle-class women became the main consumers of cultural products such as books and decorative objects, for they were the ones who had time and opportunity to cultivate a culture of
reading and social activities. They championed a literature that is constructed around the feminine virtues of piety, sensibility, and nurturing, and that propagated a culture of sentimentalism. As Douglas recognizes, however, this feminization of culture nevertheless did not imply a serious threat to the hegemony of the economic and political goals that were driven by a very different set of values:

Sentimentalism is a complex phenomenon. It asserts that the values a society’s activity denies are precisely the ones it cherishes; it attempts to deal with the phenomenon of cultural bifurcation by the manipulation of nostalgia. […] Many nineteenth-century Americans in the Northeast acted every day as if they believed that economic expansion, urbanization and industrialization represented the greatest good. It is to their credit that they indirectly acknowledged that the pursuit of these “masculine” goals meant damaging, perhaps loosing, another good, one they increasingly included under the “feminine” ideal. Yet the fact remains that their regret was calculated not to interfere with their actions.25

Douglas apparently sees a clear opposition between the sentimental values of a feminized culture on the one hand and the tougher goals that preoccupy the dominant social actors on the other. She recognizes that it is perfectly possible for a society to be driven by seemingly incompatible desires and values that are designated their own realms in which they can be acted out. Nineteenth-century America could thus harbor sentimentalism as well as the ruthless pursuit of capitalist accumulation.

The gradual development of the cult of domesticity passed through several stages. According to John Tosh, in early Victorian England the separation between work and home first became a reality for members of the middle class and professional men.26 They very much appreciated home, first of all as a well-deserved refuge for the breadwinner. Gradually, the home became the hallowed sphere of wife and children, which coincided with a growing cult of motherhood and an increasing focus on the child as the center of family life. In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, it continued to permeate the lives of men too – as husbands, as fathers, and as upholders of fireside virtues.

It is only towards the end of the nineteenth century, Tosh states, that domesticity and masculinity began to be seen as oppositional. The values of intimacy, nurturing, and comfort were increasingly perceived as threatening the reproduction of masculinity. For it is at this moment that fathers began to doubt whether their sons, who were raised in these homes under the overpowering influence of women, would be capable of displaying the manly features required for success in the public realm. One sees therefore a double
evolution towards the end of the century in Britain: on the one hand a continuing growth of masculine domesticity among the lower middle-class, and on the other hand a real crisis of domesticity among the professional and commercial classes who began to become very anxious about the diminished patriarchal authority and the dominance of a feminine ambience in the home. The result was, in these circles, a discernible male revolt against domesticity, Tosh concludes – a revolt, I would add, that had a lot in common with the anti-domesticity that pervaded heroic modernist discourses.

It is also important to realize that the ideals incorporated in the cult of domesticity had implications that went beyond the threshold of the home. As Karen Hansen points out, the etymological nearness of “domesticity” and “to domesticate” is no coincidence: domesticity is often considered as being part of a civilizing mission and as such the import of domesticity was a crucial factor in the colonial encounter. Anne McClintock builds upon this insight and unravels the connection between domesticity and imperialism, which often remains hidden from more conventional interpretations of domesticity:

imperialism and the invention of race were fundamental aspects of Western, industrial modernity. [...] At the same time, the cult of domesticity was not simply a trivial and fleeting irrelevance, belonging properly in the private, “natural” realm of the family. Rather I argue that the cult of domesticity was a crucial, if concealed dimension of male as well as female identities – shifting and unstable as they were – and are indispensable elements both of the industrial market and the imperial enterprise.

In analyzing Victorian images, commodity advertisements, and discourses, McClintock shows how the notion of domesticity, as a properly organized, “domesticated” and clean private space, was put forward as the hallmark of civilization. It was thus used to justify the colonial enterprise, in underlining the moral rightness of “the white man’s burden” that consisted in bringing this civilization to other parts of the world.

Seen from this perspective, it is clear that modernity and domesticity cannot just be seen as oppositional: if one opens up the scope of investigation more widely, and includes as well the more hidden layers of social and economic determinants that often remain concealed on the level of modernist discourses and practices, it becomes clear that there is also a certain complicity between modernity and domesticity at stake. Notwithstanding the dominant accounts that associate modernity with the public and domesticity with the private, a more thorough analysis allows one to see that this distinction is itself part of a set-up that is completely intrinsic to modernity. This insight destabilizes the neat opposition between both terms.
Women as subjects of modernity

If one tries to figure out how women related to the experience of modernity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the picture becomes still more complicated. In an often quoted essay on “The Invisible Flâneuse,” Janet Wolff has argued that women remain largely invisible in the canonical literature on modernity by Simmel, Benjamin, or Sennett, which repeatedly invokes Baudelaire’s flâneur – the stroller, the man in the crowd – as the most paradigmatic figure of modernity. In the nineteenth century, she states, women could not possibly participate in the act of inconspicuously strolling around in the city, observing the hustle and bustle and enjoying chance encounters. According to the mores of the time, virtuous women – that is, middle-class, bourgeois women – were not allowed to venture into the streets without a proper companion. Any woman who was seen on her own in the public spaces of the city ran the risk of being labeled a “public woman,” a prostitute.30

This essay by Wolff has provoked a lively debate about women’s involvement with modernity. Elisabeth Wilson, for instance, has objected to Wolff’s account of the “separate spheres” which assign women to the private space of the home and men to the public realm of the economic, political, and cultural world. According to Wilson, women were far from confined to the home in nineteenth-century metropolises. Towards the closing years of the century, there was a growing amount of eating establishments and department stores that offered new spaces for women and thus justified their presence in the streets. The boundaries between the different spheres and classes were also far from rigid since there existed intermediate social zones that allowed for negotiations and cross-overs (for example, it was not unusual that a prostitute would eventually end up as a respectable married woman). There were, moreover, a growing number of working-class women and female white-collar workers who were clearly at ease moving through the city without the chaperone required for middle-class women. The social reality of nineteenth-century London or Paris, Wilson argues, was thus far more turbulent and transgressive than Wolff depicts it, and cities offered women opportunities of freedom and self-definition that were previously unheard of.31

The late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries also saw the rise of a feminist movement, with the suffragettes campaigning for the vote and social reformers questioning the role of domesticity in the life of women. Charlotte Perkins Gilman is probably the best known example of those women who advocated a domestic revolution and who imagined new arrangements of everyday life that would allow women to participate fully in public life and in cultural activities.32 Their proposals concerned the provision of collective domestic services – communal kitchens, laundry facilities, and childcare – which would rationalize the extent to which each individual woman had to cater for her family, thus freeing them from the narrow bonds of one-family
domesticity. It is difficult to understand how such radical proposals for the transformation of everyday life can be seen as anything but “modern” and even “modernist.” Nevertheless, the history of these campaigners is usually not told as part of the great narrative of modernism, nor is their input into the discourses on social reform and emancipation fully recognized.\textsuperscript{33}

The difficult position of women as both subjects of modernity and caretakers of domesticity comes to the fore once more in the image of the New Woman. She appears in the late nineteenth century in the US as a result of the new opportunities for women in higher education and the professions, and of the increasing numbers of women entering the workforce and the public arena. From the US she migrates to Europe, where she makes an especially forceful appearance in Weimar, Germany.\textsuperscript{34} The New Woman is not confined to the home, but enjoys a freedom that brings her to the sport fields, to the social arena, and to the labor force. She lives on her own, goes out with her friends, and is sexually liberated. She is competent and confident, knowledgeable about fashion, and interested in art and culture. Although, after marriage, she will still be the one considered responsible for the home and children, she is able to move in public life on her own in a much more self-evident way than her sisters a few decades earlier. In order to manage her home, she has moreover acquired Taylorist skills, which she applies in a perfect execution of all the prescriptions of home economics. Just like the workers in Taylor’s experiments, she has learned to execute her chores in a very short time with a minimum of effort. The New Woman thus stands in for the new spirit of the age and often acts as an icon of modernity.

Janet Ward observes how in this image of the New Woman a whole series of ambivalencies were acted out that reveal the anxieties accompanying the figure of the liberated and self-reliant female. The body of the New Woman was architecturalized: it was formed according to the new ideals of sports and fashion, which resulted in a lean and athletic body that resembled more that of a prepubescent girl than that of a mature woman. This girl’s most obvious characteristic was paradoxically her masculinity, underscored also by a fashion that negated the ripe lines of a feminine body and tended towards a fluid, linear silhouette without breasts and hips. Ward states therefore that

\begin{quote}
if it is on the body of the New Woman that Weimar surface culture was most vividly inscribed in all its force – despite the fact that the figure of modernity was predominantly male, and despite the traditional view of woman as a figure of \textit{Unsachlichkeit}.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

The New Woman, however, was not allowed a very long life. In Germany, the backlash against her was most forceful, coinciding with the rise of Nazism in the early 1930s. After the 1929 economic crash, the ideal woman was
modeled again on the nurturing, motherly figure who favored the quietness of the provinces instead of the hectic pace of the metropolis. This motherly figure clearly turned her back on the calls for equality and independence.  

Whether new women or old ones, however, most females in the first half of the twentieth century did negotiate their lives around issues related to domesticity. Judy Giles lists four areas where the impact of modernization upon women’s lives was most prolific. First, increasing urbanization and the development of industrial production have led to the phenomenon of the suburb, widely seen as the ideal environment in which to raise a family. Second, the advancement of medical knowledge and technology has resulted in a remarkable improvement in basic living conditions. Better medical care, more hygienic environments, birth control, and improved nutrition brought about a situation in which life is far less brutish, short, and violent than it was in the nineteenth century – certainly for the working class. Third, the shift towards a consumerist economy has meant the rise of opportunities for comfort, enjoyment, and self-expression. Fourth, the success of scientific rationalism has charged the home with contradictory expectations. It permeated the cult of domesticity that centered upon love, family, and privacy with requirements regarding efficiency, and control, bringing about the exposure of the interior to the gaze of administrators, health workers, and domestic experts. All in all, this resulted in an ambiguous positioning of women vis-à-vis modernity:

As a result women negotiated ambiguous and ambivalent ways of seeing themselves: sometimes pulled forward as agents of change but at others pushed back as symbolizations of continuity and tradition.

Ultimately, a picture can be established in which it is clear that, for a majority of women in the West, the home has been the place where modernity was effectuated:

in the first half of the twentieth century, modernity for millions of women was about working to create a space called “home” in which violence, insecurity, disease, discomfort and pain were things of the past. This could provide women with a sense of citizenship and a stake in the future. Most importantly working to create “better” homes offered many women the opportunity to see themselves as having a central role in achieving what is believed to be the project of modern social existence, the right to define their own futures and the capacity to be in control of their own lives.

Far from being an antidote to modernity, for most of these women the home was indeed the place where modernity was enacted. And this home was not
necessarily seen as constricting and narrow. Often it was conceived of as part of a wider endeavor that aimed at a civilizing mission. The domestic virtues of loving care and subtle guidance were meant to be transposed onto the level of social organizations, welfare institutions, and the general set-up of the state. In that sense, many women and their organizations bent the ideology of domesticity in such a way that it gave them access to public life and positions of substantial influence, rather than limiting them to the strict confines of their own household.39

The radical opposition to domestic ideals adopted by second-wave feminism in the wake of Betty Friedan’s *A Feminine Mystique* was thus typically a phenomenon of the 1960s and 1970s.40 This feminism claimed that the fundamental equality between men and women invalidated the idea that they should occupy different roles in life. The burdens and enjoyments of the home, they thought, should be shared by both men and women, and the same should apply to the challenges and rewards of work and social activities. This feminist line of thinking has given rise to the policy of equal opportunities that is by now officially adopted in most Western countries. It means that the legal system now treats men and women as totally equal subjects: they have to answer to the same rules and bear the same responsibilities.

Nevertheless, reality lags far behind policy and shows the continuing strength and influence of the ideology of domesticity. Although this ideology is nowadays tacit rather than explicit, statistics clearly show that, in general, men are devoting many more hours to their paid jobs than women, and that women spend, on average, many more hours than their male partners in childcaring and other domestic activities. In 1999 Flanders, for example, men spend an average of 27 hours and 25 minutes on their job, women only 15 hours and 40 minutes; on the other hand, women devote an average of 25 hours and 37 minutes a week to household chores and childcare, and men only 13 hours 26 minutes.41 Data such as these clearly show that the traditional role patterns aligned with the ideology of domesticity still have a major influence on the daily life of the great majority of people. It makes sense, therefore, to question whether and how such gendered patterns might have sedimented in architecture.

**Architecture and the domestic realm**

Modern architecture maintained an ambivalent relationship with the New Woman. She is often hailed as a symbolic figure embodying the spirit of modernity, as, for instance, in the discourse of Sigfried Giedion, Ernst May, or Le Corbusier.42 At the same time, however, her actual presence in the profession was not really encouraged. According to its official policy, the Bauhaus, for example, welcomed women students on the same basis as men. In reality, however, women were banned from the most prestigious workshops
(painting and sculpture) and were kept far away from the sacred core of the architecture class itself. The New Woman probably played her most prolific role in modern architecture as the instigator and the client for several of the most famous private houses produced in the twentieth century. As Alice Friedman argues, it is in the encounter between emancipated women who were fundamentally rethinking domesticity on the one hand, and creative architects on the other, that the most innovative designs for the home were produced.

For this is also a feature of modern architecture: notwithstanding its masculinist rhetoric that glorified ascetism, authenticity, and integrity as aesthetic ideals, the focus of modernist architects was to a very large extent oriented towards the home. Although they often share the heroic, anti-domestic rhetoric of avant-garde in the visual arts, nevertheless they are concerned with the designing of the home. The genealogy of modernism in architecture indeed goes back upon a culture focusing on dwelling and domesticity. The Arts and Crafts movement of William Morris, the Wiener Werkstätte of Josef Hoffmann, or the books by Muthesius on the art of living—all three of them repeatedly mentioned in history books as important sources of modernism in architecture—centered on the design of beautiful, comfortable, and modern homes. Many artists interested in abstract art also explored the abstract implications of the applied arts and investigated how the decorative arts could contribute to pure form. They experimented with “abstract interiors” that would transfer the objective, universal qualities they strived for in their art to the spatial realm of home or studio. This kind of practice clearly undermines the supposedly clear-cut opposition between the heroic pursuit of an abstract ideal on the one hand and the narrow-mindedness associated with domesticity on the other. As a consequence, these practices occupy an uneasy position in between the different domains of art and everyday living.

Nobody formulated this more astutely then Adolf Loos who was, together with Karl Kraus, battling against such, in his eyes, inadmissible conflations of different domains. It is worthwhile to recall here Loos’ famous statement in which he delineates architecture from art (condemning, with the same gesture, all those who do not respect that delimitation):

The house has to please everyone, contrary to the work of art, which does not. The work of art is a private matter for the artist. The house is not. The work of art is brought into the world without there being a need for it. The house satisfies a requirement. The work of art is responsible to none; the house is responsible to everyone. The work of art wants to draw people out of their state of comfort. The house has to serve comfort. The work of art is revolutionary, the house conservative. The work of art shows
people directions and thinks of the future. The house thinks of the present. Man loves everything that satisfies his comfort. He hates everything that wants to draw him out of his acquired and secured position and that disturbs him. Thus he loves the house and hates art.

Does it follow that the house has nothing in common with art and is architecture not to be included among the arts? That is so. Only a very small part of architecture belongs to art: the tomb and the monument. Everything else that fulfills a function is to be excluded from the domain of art.46

Following Loos, architecture should basically be about the house and everyday living, whereas artists should leave the realm of the everyday – they should refrain from meddling with the house. This means that Loos subscribes to the opposition between (modern) art and the everyday, between (modern) art and the domestic, but that he does make an explicit exception for architecture. Unlike other disciplines, architecture, Loos implies, is to forge the framework for everyday living, and should thus deal with domesticity.

The house indeed became a focal point of attention for modern architects, not only in the writings of Hermann Muthesius, Le Corbusier, or Bruno Taut, but also in the practices of many European modernists such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, J.J.P. Oud, or Ernst May. And it was not just the private house of the wealthy client that deserved the masters’ attention. Gropius, May, Taut, even Le Corbusier and Mies were involved in the design of social housing and with urbanism, and their aims were originally set onto changing the whole environment of all modern men – not just the most exclusive sites occupied by elite groups.47 Their intent, therefore, was not simply equivalent with the suppression of domesticity as signaled by Christopher Reed, but rather aimed at its fundamental transformation.

This means that it is too simplistic to understand modern architecture as part of a heroic modernism that, in glorifying the sites and ideals of high culture, denied or repressed feminine values, for the protagonists of the Modern Movement were also very much concerned with a rapprochement to the realm of the everyday. They were not just refined aesthetes who looked down upon popular forms of mass culture and isolated themselves in an ivory tower, away from mundane issues. Some of them were part of avant-garde movements such as constructivism that explicitly addressed issues of everyday living and the organization of the household. This specifically applied to the so-called “leftists” within CIAM, a group consisting of mostly German and Swiss architects, comprising Hannes Meyer, Ernst May, Hans Schmidt, and others.48 They held the view that modern architecture was to contribute to a radical change in the structure of society and that it had to deal first of
all with social issues. Modern architecture was to provoke a revolution in dwelling culture by the introduction of themes and concepts such as the open plan, transparency between inside and outside, collective housing, rationalization, hygiene, efficiency, and ergonomics.

A utopia of daily life
Karel Teige’s book Nejmenší byt, as The Minimum Dwelling (2002), which recently became available in English, clearly documents this leftist position. Moreover, it shows an awareness of how the set-up of the house was gendered throughout. Teige quotes at length Marx and Engels on the bourgeois family and how that specific structure of the family is based on the overt and hidden slavery of women, since they have to take up the burden of domestic work which prevents them from taking part in public production:

Not unlike the bourgeois family, the layout of the bourgeois dwelling is equally based on the enslavement of women (as an expression of that type of family). Today’s woman does not realize how oppressed she has become by this form of dwelling. Today’s family homes, whether villas or rental apartments, enslave the woman-housewife in equal measure with their uneconomical housekeeping routines. Private life in today’s dwellings is obliged to closely conform to the dictates of bourgeois marriage.49

Because of this, Teige advocated that the new minimum dwelling for the working classes should be conceived of in a radical different way. Given the fact that proletarian families did not really have a family life anyhow – because the reality of production conditions forced them to devote too much time to commuting and working hours, so that the only time they spent at home was for sleeping – Teige argued that this situation should be taken as an opportunity to develop a new way of collective living. The minimum dwelling, according to him, should contain for each adult a live-in cell with a bedroom annex sitting-room, but without a kitchen or further facilities. All these facilities should be made available as collective services, the pattern of family life would thus be broken up and each individual, man as well as woman, could free him- or herself from this burden in order to exploit fully his or her potential for participation in public life.

The shift from bourgeois to proletarian housing is theorized by Walter Benjamin too. As stated earlier, Benjamin saw a clear connection between the rise of industrial capitalism on the one hand and the emergence of domesticity in the bourgeois interior on the other. In his analysis of the bourgeois interior he formulated some intriguing reflections on the notion of dwelling:
The original form of all dwelling is existence not in a house but in a shell. The shell bears the impression of its occupant. In the most extreme instance, the dwelling becomes a shell. The nineteenth century, like no other century, was addicted to dwelling. It conceived the residence as a receptacle for the person, and it encased him with all his appurtenances so deeply in the dwelling’s interior, that one might be reminded of the inside of a compass case, where the instrument with all its accessories lies embedded in deep, usually violet folds of velvet.50

As much as this description may convey a sense of love and appreciation, nevertheless it is consistent with Benjamin’s condemnation, in his essay on “Experience and Poverty,” of these interiors as completely bound up with exploitation and injustice, for Benjamin was convinced that these interiors were intimately linked with the capitalist values of property, ownership, and ostentation.51 Their message to every visitor, he stated, was unmistakable: “there is nothing here for you; you are a stranger in this house.” Consequently, this way of dwelling could not be made productive for the twentieth century.

Benjamin’s visit to Moscow in the winter of 1926–1927 had given him first-hand contact with the Russian living conditions at that particular time. It was an extraordinary moment since the revolutionary attempts at restructuring the material world of daily life were visibly influencing the way people occupied their accommodations. Benjamin attested to how people were trying to get rid of the petit-bourgeois aspect of “coziness” that overshadowed interiors “over which the devastating assault of commodity capital [had] victoriously swept.”52 To annihilate the traces of coziness, he accounted, they rearranged weekly the furniture in bare rooms, devoid of pictures on the walls, cushions on the sofas, or ornaments on the mantelpiece. They could bear with this because their real dwelling place was not their house, but the office, the club, or the street. They had given up private life to indulge fully in collective life.53

The restructuring of daily life was advocated by avant-garde artists such as Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rochenko who promoted the so-called novyi byt (new forms of domesticity). This new way of life, which was also advocated by many feminists, would no longer be based upon the nuclear family, but upon a broader association of adults, with children living separately from their parents.54 According to Olga Matich, this movement can be symbolically summed up in its rejection of the marital bed:

the proponents of novyi byt replaced the double bed of generational continuity and social stability with the mobile single bed. It was an emblem of the new Soviet person who believed in the end of the family and in mechanized, accelerated everyday life. Culture in
the traditional sense, handed down from one generation to the next, was abolished, to be replaced by the culture of the new Soviet person who either does not sleep or sleeps in keeping with scientific rules of physical revivification. The New Man and the New Woman do not have children, or if they do, they live separately from them, asserting the supremacy of the non-biological family.55

Walter Benjamin, who was deeply taken by his Moscow experiences, recognized a similar utopian impulse in the modern architecture of his contemporaries. He declared that in the twentieth century, the days of the cozy interior were over, since dwelling as seclusion and security had had its day. Dwelling would no longer be recorded in ineradicable imprints, but was to be articulated in changeable constructions and anonymous, transitory interiors. This new environment harbored an important promise, since its coolness represented the openness and transparency that were characteristic of a new form of society:

For it is the hallmark of this epoch that dwelling in the old sense of the word where security had priority has had its day. Giedion, Mendelsohn, Corbusier turned the abiding places of man into a transit area for every conceivable kind of energy and for electric currents and radio waves. The time that is coming will be dominated by transparency.56

Benjamin’s high esteem for modern architecture had to do above all with the metaphorical qualities that he discerns in it. For him, its transparency and porosity pointed forward to a classless society still to come, its coldness and sobriety were forebears of an era in which it would no longer be necessary to seclude oneself from one’s neighbors, an era where warmth and security would pervade the whole of social structure, and therefore no longer needed to be provided by one’s individual home.

It is clear that Teige and Benjamin thus constructed modern architecture as radically critical of conventional patterns of family life, sedimented in the bourgeois houses of the nineteenth century with their overfull interiors. According to their diagnosis, these interiors were deeply ingrained with capitalist commodity culture and corresponded to an oppressive, patriarchal, individualist, and unjust social system. The new architecture with its bare interiors, its open plan and rational kitchens, on the other hand, would teach people that material belongings are less important than a social spirit, they would liberate women from the burden of too heavy domestic duties, and they would act as perfect accommodations for a life that would be much more mobile and flexible.
Given these radical connotations, it is hardly surprising that modern architecture failed to become a popular success in most Western countries. As Tim Brindley argues, the ideas behind it were part of an elitist culture that was out of touch with the desires and concerns of the working classes. Modern architects created houses whose appearance was completely different from established conventions, and in the long run these houses failed to appeal to the people they were meant for. This was most specifically the case for modern mass housing, since it relied on standardization, uniformity, and economies of scale, whereas the trends in the sphere of consumption have rather been towards product diversification, differentiation, and choice.

In market conditions housing has behaved like other consumption commodities, where products which fundamentally meet the same needs are differentiated to provide consumers with a range of choice and to represent perceived social distinctions – exactly the opposite of the principles applied to Modern housing. The radical disjuncture which the latter now represents puts it outside the “normal” range of housing choices. If this hypothesis is correct we would expect to see Modern housing either totally rejected or modified to make it more like the norm, and this is exactly what has happened. 57

In most Western countries (with the possible exception of the Netherlands), modern architecture was indeed perceived by the general public as inimical to domesticity. 58 Nevertheless, if we are looking for an architecture displaying a critical engagement with the gender patterns inscribed in the spatial lay-out of the home, we have to turn towards products of modern architecture. As Alice Friedman argues, the most prominent examples of twentieth-century houses built by famous architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Gerrit Rietveld, or Richard Neutra often imply an unconventional and innovative approach to the requirements of domestic life. They seek to rearrange the relationship between the different rooms, they shift the balance between public and private spaces, or they seek to expand the definition of home to include various types of work or leisure activities. 59

Houses by Adolf Loos, to give another example, are elaborated in a very theatrical way. They stage and frame the play of daily life through a choreography of arrivals and departures, through complex spatial interrelations between different rooms and through a careful directing of the gaze. 60 Although Loos’ houses at first sight seem to confirm conventional gender patterns, they are not simply reproducing a well-known gendered distribution of space. By mimetically enacting this distribution, by framing it as if it becomes a stage for a play, a shift occurs. These houses render visible their
own operativity in the construction of subject positions. They no longer silently obey cultural conventions, but displace them by making them manifest and by negotiating the direction of the gaze. Loos’ houses thus engage critically with gender patterns, opening up new possibilities because they work at making their inhabitants more aware of the influence of the existing ones. His houses do not completely annihilate traditional domesticity — unlike those of Le Corbusier or Mies van der Rohe, which are much more radical in this respect — but rather displace it, rendering its effects more fluid and negotiable. One might wonder, however, about the elasticity of the notion of domesticity. Would a domesticity transformed along the lines of utopian and feminist visions still be perceived as domestic? As Terence Riley observes:

Perhaps the loss, or at least diminishment, of the traditional concept of domesticity is the price that has to be paid to insure that men and women have equal opportunities to develop their talents in both public and private spheres. Who would at this point in time insist that there is a real alternative to this proposition? Yet this raises even more questions. If the private house no longer has a domestic character, what sort of character will it have?61

Inhabitation as appropriation
In contrasting the utopia of daily life with the bourgeois cozy interior, two polar opposites have been constructed that hardly ever occur in a real-life situation. The caricature painted by the critics of the cozy interior has it that this interior is stifling and overwhelming because it forces its inhabitants to confirm to its pre-established logic: since all objects in that interior have been selected with great care, they create a kind of case/cage for the inhabitant that hardly leaves him any room to change. Moreover, another version of the argument goes, because this interior consists of objects that have been commodified, it is completely inauthentic and reinforces capitalist oppression. The abstract and bare utopian interior, on the other hand, is so rational and anonymous that it seems totally inappropriate as a personal space where the inhabitant could feel “at home.” It seems absolutely reductive in its treatment of the human being, as if individuals can live their lives satisfactorily on the basis of their participation in the public realm alone. It is as if the discourse advocating this new way of dwelling is forging it on purely masculine terms, without any consideration of sensibilities and desires that are usually qualified as “feminine”: the caring for things invested with memories or cultural significance, the transmittance of private meanings and values to the next generation, the continuous arranging and rearranging of the necessities for daily life, the performance of family rituals and acts of emotional bonding.
Both extremes – the bourgeois interior and the naked utopia – seem to deny one of the crucial qualities that is inherent to most people’s experience of domesticity: the fact that “making a home” is a continuous process that requires a lot of effort and work, and that is obviously never “finished.” It is this insight that seems to underline an enigmatic remark by Benjamin that refers to dwelling as some repetitive act – or rather process – of inhabitation:

“To dwell” is a transitive verb – as in the notion of “indwelt spaces”; herewith an indication of the frenetic topicality concealed in habitual behavior. It has to do with fashioning a shell for ourselves.62

This means that Benjamin understands dwelling as an active form of interaction between the inhabitant and his environment in which the individual and his surroundings adjust to each other. In the German original, he refers to the grammatical connection between “wohnen” (dwelling) and “gewohnt” (customary, habitual), a connection that is found in English between “habit” and “inhabit” or “dwell” and “indwelt”: dwelling, inhabiting, in this sense has to do with the formation of habits. To inhabit a house means to go through a mutual process of molding in which house and inhabitant become adapted to one another.

This understanding is consistent with recent sociological studies that describe practices of inhabitation as a form of “appropriation.” Daniel Miller, for instance, has developed a theory of consumption in which he states that consumption practices (for example, those related to the decoration of the home) basically have to do with the struggle to appropriate goods and services made in abstract, alienable circumstances, in order to transform them into something that is contributing to the construction of the self.63 This theory has been the basis for a series of ethnographic studies that focus on the material culture of daily life.64 In those studies, the home is shown to have multiple significances. It can be read as a symbolic container expressing the identities of its inhabitants as well as conveying more general cultural assumptions and beliefs about the world. At the same time, however, there are many conflicts between the agency expressed by individuals, by the family, the household, and by the material structure of the house itself. Individuals occupy houses, as Miller states, but houses also occupy individuals. He thus acknowledges that “the home itself is both a site of agency and a site of mobility, rather than simply a kind of symbolic system that acts as the backdrop or blueprint for practice and agency.”65

What is at stake is indeed the interaction between inhabitant and home. Following Benjamin’s lead, one could state that in the nineteenth-century constellation that gave rise to the bourgeois dwelling, the interaction
is a rather slow and enduring process: the inhabitant settles in an interior as if enveloped in a case, a shell, and this situation tends to be rather static. Modern life, however, significantly increases the pace of this process because it requires individuals to change and adapt themselves much more frequently. This results in dwelling as a sort of “frenetic topicality,” as Benjamin indicated. For me, this phrasing suggests a mode of dwelling very much in tune with the modern condition of changeability and transparency. I tend to read it as implying a continuing gesture, as if the shell is not fashioned once and for all, but rather again and again. This kind of dwelling therefore involves the constant shaping and reshaping of a shell.

As such, it might be connected to the idea of mimesis – another of Benjamin’s interesting notions. The concept of mimesis as used by Benjamin refers to an act of imitation resulting in a similarity without exact likeness. Mimesis implies the occurrence of shifts and displacements, as found, for example, in an act of translation from one language into another: usually a translation cannot completely “cover” the original, there are always slight differences and distortions that shift the meaning. Benjamin’s understanding of the new dwelling can be framed within this notion of mimesis. When he mentions the “fashioning of a shell,” this implies a mimetic gesture, since the shell will relate to the body it surrounds in a not-completely exact way. The shell mediates between the body and the outside world, and in this mediating process effectuates a sort of “translation.” This translation, however, is not stable or fixed – which is how it was in the bourgeois interior – but is continually under revision. Since the modern individual’s subjectivity is in a permanent state of transition, his or her interior should be able to answer to this condition of transitoriness and should be capable of continuous change and variability. The most radical version of this would consist of a completely anonymous interior that is only appropriated on a temporary basis, such as, for instance, a hotel room. For Benjamin, the Russian experiments were heading in that direction.

This kind of dwelling, which echoes the experience of the traveler or the migrant, can also be associated with the “nomadic identities” that, for instance, Chantal Mouffe is advocating. This concept refers to the idea that, since any identity is always relational and defined in terms of difference, it can hardly be fixed in some positive essence: every identity is irremediably destabilized by its exterior and therefore subject to a process of permanent hybridization and nomadization. This, it seems to me, is what is at stake in the most radical version of modern architecture’s dream of ultimate changeability and transparency: if people’s identities are all the time moving and shifting because of ongoing interactions with the outside world, they can only be accommodated in interiors that do not determine them, but rather allow for the greatest possible flexibility.
What is missing from this dream, however, is an awareness of how most people try to live their daily lives. As soon became clear in the Soviet Union, the practical applicability of the utopian version of domesticity was far from obvious. Due to all kinds of resisting forces, most of the Soviet housing actually built after 1930 did not comply with novyi bit. Not the least of these forces was the need of most people to invest their interiors with their family history and objects charged with cultural meaning. The utter rationality of utopian domesticity could not overcome the demands of mimetic appropriation that continued to be present, even in a revolutionary context.

Mimetic strategies
This evocation of the import of mimetic strategies can and should be understood as a recoding of the interaction between modernity and domesticity in terms of the inscription of the feminine. Indeed, according to a long-standing tradition in Western philosophy, mimesis is seen in opposition with rationality, the first being associated with femininity, the latter with masculinity. Without the intention to hypostasize this opposition – as if mimesis would somehow “belong” more to women than to men – nevertheless I want to underscore the relevance of mimesis for a feminist project, for, as Luce Irigaray has stated, it makes sense for women to adopt, appropriate, and warp whatever issues come their way in order to forge wider opportunities for themselves out of these issues:

One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it. […] To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to locate the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself – inasmuch as she is on the side of the “perceptible”, of “matter” – to “ideas”, in particular to ideas about herself that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make “visible” by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: recovering a possible operation of the feminine in language.

This proposal stems from the observation that women are not controlling their own identity – they are not able to directly experience their own being since this experience is always already mediated through a system of representation which is established by men and for men, and in which the woman is reduced to mirroring the man. In such circumstances mimesis offers a valuable tactic because it enables women to subvert – by the double gesture of assimilation and displacement – the identification imposed upon them.
Mimesis, as an inscription of the feminine, can be seen as operating on different levels in the practices and discourses related to modernity and domesticity. First, the act of “home-making” – that is, the act of appropriating a house by decorating it, furnishing it, investing it with the mementoes of personal and family histories – has historically been constructed as a female practice. This historical association is to a large extent still operational. One of its effects is that in a male-dominated field such as architecture, it is still mostly women who write on domesticity and gender – witness the list of contributors to this book. It might be, as Bonnie Kime Scott suggests, that women write more about gender because it is more imposed upon them, more disqualifying, or simply more intriguing and stimulating to their creativity. It might also be that women feel more the need to come to terms with domesticity because they are supposedly very familiar with it and nevertheless have difficulties in “placing” it within the architectural narratives in which they are educated. Several of the contributions to this book – including my own – can probably be understood as the result of a quest to make this real-life tension productive in scholarly ways.

Second, mimesis is also at work in the critical moments where modern architecture questions, subverts, undermines, or thwarts conventional gender patterns. The operation to “translate” innovative domestic programs into architecture forms involves an operation in which conventional patterns are displaced and subverted. The traditional house is never completely absent from the modern house. However much the architects claimed that they were inventing prototypes that never before existed, it is clear that their designs did not come from scratch, but rather were radical reinterpretations of older forms. Through mimesis, as Adorno would have it, these architects were capable of critically altering these given types and to design new forms of dwelling that supposedly would better suit modern life. The most interesting among these new forms, I would state, also allowed for another engagement with domesticity and hence with gender.

One should not underestimate to what extent spatial patterns do influence our sense of gender. Judith Butler argues that gender is not something that is attributed to an already pre-existing subject because of this subject’s biological characteristics, but rather something that is produced through its repetitive enactment in response to discursive forces. I would add that these “discursive forces” are themselves sustained and supported through the spatial patterns in which they have crystallized. Spatial elements such as the “master bedroom,” the “rational kitchen,” or “the study” do have implications in terms of gender, since their unproblematized presence in the home underscores the expectance that it will be inhabited by a married couple, with the wife an expert cook and the husband keen on his privacy. Following Butler, what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured
through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. The only strategy to deal with this condition is through accepting and repeating it:

The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself. 74

Such displacement might be enhanced, I would argue, not only through the queer practices of bodily inscription that Butler takes as her main examples, but also through spatial set-ups that refuse simply to reproduce received patterns. Architecture can contribute to that end by mimetically displacing domesticity, as will become clear from several examples, some of which are discussed in Chapters 4, 9, 13, and 14 of this book.

Notes
10 See, for instance, their texts anthologized in Hilde Heynen, André Looeckx, Lieven De Cauter, and Karina Van Herck (eds), “Dat is architectuur.” Sleutelteksten uit de twintigste eeuw (“This is Architecture.” Key Texts from the 20th century), Rotterdam: 010, 2001, pp. 32–36 (Hermann Muthesius, 1900); pp. 48–50 (Henry van de Velde, 1902); pp. 63–66 (Adolf Loos, 1910).
between mainstream modernism, which was antidomestic, and other strands of modernism, like the Bloomsbury group, which rather developed their modernist visions around the issue of domesticity.


16 Andreas Huyssen, After the Great Divide, pp. vii–viii.


19 I found Vivian Liska’s mapping of these tendencies very useful. See Vivian Liska, “Die Moderne als Weib,” pp. 20–21.

20 See the work of Rosi Braidotti, Sigrid Weigel, Judith Butler, or Elisabeth Grosz.


24 Joan Williams, for instance, focuses on juridical aspects. According to her, the ideology of domesticity meant a certain improvement over the previous situation of full fledged patriarchy, in which men held total power over their wives and daughters for the simple reason that females were seen, unequivocally, as inferior human beings. Domesticity was at least based on an effort to conceptualize men and women as human beings who were, although different, equal, their difference leading up to different roles in life, which were not presented in a hierarchical order but rather as complementary. Of course, Williams accedes, this theoretical equality never worked out as such in real life, but the mere evocation of it in theory already was a step forwards in comparison with earlier periods in Western history. Joan Williams, Unbending Gender. Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do About It, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 19–37.


29 Domesticity is typically associated with whiteness, as is shown not only by McClintoch, but for a later period also by Wendy Webster. She analyzes, for instance, how in films from the 1950s and 1960s white people were consistently represented as having a family and enjoying domestic repose, whereas black people never appeared in a domestic setting of their own. Wendy Webster, Imagining Home. Gender, “Race” and National Identity, 1945–64, London: UCL Press, 1998.


38 Ibid., p. 164.


59 Alice Friedman, Women and the Making of the Modern House, p. 17.


66 Three essays by Benjamin are relevant here: “Ueber Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache der Menschen,” an early essay of 1916 translated as “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” (in Reflections, pp. 314–332), and two short, later essays, that are essentially variations of the same text: “Lehre vom Ähnlichen” and “Ueber das mimetische vermögen,” of which only the latter one, “On the Mimetic Faculty” has been translated (in Reflections, pp. 333–336).

Lacoue-Labarthe, for instance, relates the anti-mimetic attitude that prevails in the philosophical tradition to the threat that comes from the feminine. He analyzes Plato’s rejection of mimesis which is connected to the latter’s association of the mimetic with the tales that women tell little children. The Greek philosopher considers their influence to be dangerous because in these stories the clear distinction between truth and lies is dissolved. Lacoue-Labarthe argues that a sort of male urge to rebel against the primary control of the mother is underlying Plato’s text at this point. Plato thus prepared the ground for the anti-mimetic attitude that one encounters so often in philosophy. Anti-mimesis, Lacoue-Labarthe explains, refers to nothing else than the ultimate Hegelian dream of philosophy, the dream of an absolute knowledge, of a subject that understands its own conception perfectly, thus also controlling it perfectly. The dream of a perfect autonomy is constantly threatened by the confusing plurality that mimesis represents. It is, in other words, threatened by instability, by feminization. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Typography,” in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Typography. Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, pp. 43–138, pp. 126–129.


Bonnie Kime Scott, The Gender of Modernism, p. 3.


Ibid., p. 189.
The notion of domesticity effortlessly resonates with family life consisting of mother, father, and children. As argued by contemporary authors, our understanding of domesticity as such emerged in seventeenth-century Netherlands and spread throughout the Western world in the following two centuries. The woman in the mother and the man in the father, let alone the sexuality of children, are often silenced in this familiar formulation. These figures are assigned socially acceptable roles that are supported by the architecture of the house. Sexuality is an implicit burden of domesticity and its architecture. It is implicit because the sexual overtones of architectural discourse on domesticity are too often and too conveniently naturalized. It is a burden because the stakes in its recognition are usually high. Once sexuality is explicitly and critically addressed, disciplinary boundaries are threatened, established categories fail, and new terms emerge, which productively disable the status quo. Questions proliferate. How do women and men occupy domestic space? How do femininity and masculinity figure in domestic discourses and practices? How do women and men relate to femininity and masculinity?

The majority of the existing work on sexuality, space, and domesticity emphasize women, and women’s subjectivity in the architecture of the...
single-family house. Although such studies continue to be crucial in resisting the naturalized male dominance in spatial practices, much work remains to be done on the layering of both female and male voices and the production of feminine and masculine subjectivities in domestic environments. In fact, one of the most critical and sensitive issues in addressing sexuality is the essentialization of the relation of women to femininity and men to masculinity. It is not always easy to remember that phallocentric discourses and practices are not necessarily performed by men and femininity is not the exclusive realm of women. Lacanian theory powerfully reminds us that the phallus is a disembodied construct which stands for the symbolic law. It is detached from biological references and stands for mastery, control of meaning, truth claims, and objectivity of knowledge. In this account, masculinity and femininity emerge as enunciative positions that can be occupied by men and women interchangeably. This is not to deny the importance of subject positions that are rooted in social practices, however. As Susan Bordo reminds us, the symbol of the phallus is a historical construct that emerges “out of forms of reverence that did have reference to biology, and these references themselves have analogues in the morphology and behavior of other male animals.”

The complicated and tenuous relationship between subject positions as women and men, and the enunciative positions of femininity and masculinity have serious implications for architectural theory. At one level, one may argue that the Western architectural canon, which is based on the autonomy of the built object and the creativity of the architect as the master subject, marks a phallocentric form of knowledge. It naturalizes the dominant position of the male architect, the architect-designed building, and the Western world. As such, even as it expands its domain to non-urban and non-Western geographies, and includes women subjects as architects, users, and patrons, it often does so by means of assimilation and incorporation. In other words, the contents of the discipline expand, but its phallocentric boundaries remain intact.

In addressing sexuality in domesticity, the task of the critical historian/theorist is twofold. On the one hand, the continual deconstruction of the masculinist premises of the architectural canon is crucial. Critical questions need to be asked. How does architecture define domesticity? What are the underlying premises of this definition? How do female/male bodies and feminine/masculine characterizations figure in these premises? Answering these questions involves both exposing the boundaries of the discipline and discovering unprecedented architectural horizons that exceed these boundaries. On the other hand, the strategic importance of recognizing hitherto marginalized subject positions that exist outside the image of the single-family household and therefore suppressed in discourses of domesticity, is evident. The connection between these two tasks may not always be explicit but provides one
of the most potent points of critical exploration in the field. By means of addressing these issues, I will now focus on how sexuality figures in domestic practices and discourses in terms of the agency of sexed bodies, discursive constructs and the materiality of space.

**Agency**

Although domesticity and women are inextricably linked in our social, cultural and disciplinary discourses, experiences, and practices, the complex agency of women in the making of domesticity does not often attract critical attention. What kind of domesticity is at stake in this link? How do women perform in the domestic realm and in whose name? Whose language do they speak and who hears them? Recent work has shown that Western architecture is marked by a discursive lineage that explicitly links domesticity with women.

In an inspiring study on Alberti’s texts, architectural theorist Mark Wigley demonstrates that sexuality plays a significant role in the Renaissance discourse on the house.5 Alberti says:

> Women . . . are almost all timid by nature, soft, slow, and therefore more useful when they sit still and watch over things. It is as though nature thus provided for our well-being, arranging for men to bring things home and for women to guard them. . . . The man should guard the woman, the house, and his family and country, but not by sitting still.6

As Wigley argues, woman’s duty is to guard the house, but according to the law that precedes both her and the house. This is the law of the father, the law of marriage as the taming of desire, and the law of order and surveillance. Hence, the Albertian notion of the house is based on masculine control over sexuality and desire. The house is a site of order and purification which is maintained by the woman who does not need to move outside. In other words, the order of domesticity is based on the active agency of men and the passivity of women.

Not surprisingly, variations of the Albertian notion of domesticity, which are deeply rooted in patriarchal societies, remained unchallenged until the emergence of feminist movements in the nineteenth century. However, the repercussions of the latter in the field of architecture remained marginal to the disciplinary discourse until recently. In fact, the earliest considerations of gender in architecture came as a result of the realization of the exclusion of women architects from the discipline.7 This new consciousness involved the introduction of individual women into the grand narrative of architectural history. More importantly, however, the recognition of women as active subjects in spatial production meant to look differently at the very constitution of the architectural canon. The avant-garde model of history was challenged.
Architectural history’s conventional emphasis on architect-designed buildings shifted to such issues as patronage, social production, and the use of both domestic and popular spaces where women figured as active subjects. The new focus on domesticity brought architectural history close to social and cultural history.

Dolores Hayden’s and Gwendolyn Wright’s work on American architecture are exemplary in that respect. In these authors’ work, women feature as active agents of spatial production rather than passive recipients of buildings designed by (mostly) male architects. Turning their attention to hitherto unexplored areas of domesticity, Wright and Hayden have analyzed the historical relationship between the concepts of ideal home and family to theories of domestic reform and home economics. Case studies on the role of women in relation to domestic environments in different regions have multiplied in the following two decades. Many of these focus on the single-family household women’s agency in the production of domestic environments as wife and mother. Indeed, this has been strategically important in view of the domination of the male figure in the architectural scene at a particular historical instance, which is far from being surpassed. However, as recent but scattered work indicates, the time is ripe to address other female subjectivities, such as aged parents, adult daughters, domestic servants, and single women, that have been active agents in the making of domestic spaces. How do these marginalized figures relate to the normative single family household? How is their making of domesticity different from the wife/parent? Can we speak of a unified notion of domesticity in the first place?

These questions are also pertinent with respect to the male figure who has been largely absent from early studies on domesticity. This is hardly surprising since such studies were linked to the larger field of feminist theory and practice at a time when feminism seemed to be the exclusive turf of women much more than today. As critical studies have abundantly exemplified, the straight white male, “strong, silent, cool, handsome, unemotional, successful, master of women, leader of men, wealthy, brilliant, athletic and ‘heavy,’” is the privileged figure of masculinity which represses others. The house is but one of the sites where such repression is reproduced, surfaced, or undermined. Issues of masculinity rarely feature in architectural analyses other than the critique of its conventional forms based on dominance and control. Of course, the powerful and exploitative agency of men as head of the single-family household has always been the reference for feminist work on domesticity. However, not all men fit the bill. Bachelors, gay men, adult sons, aged fathers, and servants are other male figures whose agency remains largely absent from conventional scholarship. It is also important to remember that since no identity can be totalized, the enunciative position of masculinity may not totally characterize even the privileged male subject.
Much work remains to be done regarding the complex articulation of the agency of the male figure with the architecture of domesticity.

Two cautionary remarks come to mind at this point. First, all of these relatively marginal figures, female and male, potentially alter our conventional ways of thinking about domesticity and pave alternative ways of understanding such issues as privacy/publicity and the architecture of familial interpersonal encounters. In other words, it is hardly sufficient to submit them to existing methods of architectural history and spatial analysis. If our understanding of domesticity is based on parameters that shape the single-family household, the recognition of the agency of women and men that do not conform to this model have the potential to alter the very parameters by which we define domesticity and domestic space.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, we need to keep in mind that the notion of agency is inseparable from the notion of the subject. As current critical work on feminism and psychoanalysis has shown, the sociological model of the unitary, singular, self-reflective subject is hardly sufficient in explaining the complexity of human agency. The psychic register exceeds the domain of the conscious subject. Once it is taken into account, the rupture between the image of the subject as a unity and the perception of itself as a site of fragmentation and disorganized experience cannot be overlooked. The unified “I” emerges only within and as the matrix of a whole set of social, cultural, racial, and gender relations that call for critical examination. The naming of subjects as woman, man, mother, father, daughter, and son marks both the setting of a boundary and the repeated inculcation of a norm. Repetitive interpellations of such unified subjects support the given structures of space and power.

To sum up, the normative structure of domesticity has largely been the single-family household governed by heterosexual relationships with man as the head of the household and woman as the caretaker. Once other figures of masculinity and femininity enter the scene, both the notion of a normative unified subject and the norm of domesticity are challenged, for these others are bound to cite the norm differently. In Judith Butler’s terms, since the subjects’ recognition depend on their repetitive performance of the law, failure to repeat it constitutes a perpetual threat. That is precisely why studies on domesticity have largely excluded non-normative subjects from their boundaries. The latter’s inclusion ultimately provides unprecedented opportunities to reconsider not only the boundaries of domesticity, but of the architectural discipline as well.

Language

Notions of agency and the subject are inevitably linked to language. The subject both speaks and is also spoken through by discourse, law, and
The gendered connotations of our disciplinary discourses often pass unnoticed, even by critical thinkers. The long history of women’s association with space in the Western philosophical tradition is particularly pertinent here.

Feminist critic Elizabeth Grosz has extensively argued how Plato’s notion of *chora* is associated both with spatiality and the function of femininity. In Plato’s discourse, *chora* is the receptacle, the condition for the existence of material objects but without having a form of its own. It produces a founding concept of femininity as a space which engenders, nurtures, and gives without possessing and receiving. *Chora* is the passive space of maternal care that enables the birth of material existence which is gendered as masculine. Luce Irigaray too has argued how traditionally the body of woman has represented space and has been used by men as the material of their own temporality. She asserts that phallocentric modes of thinking have obliterated the debt they owe to the maternal space that brings them into being. More recently, Sue Best has pointed out the persistent discursive link between women and space, and argued that from cities to nations and regions, bounded spatial entities are consistently feminized in our discourses. Best shows that this marks a masculinist desire of domination and control. Space, once feminized, is rendered docile. It can be shaped, molded, and penetrated without resistance. Houses, cities, nations, and regions need to be ordered, regimented, and controlled. They are governed by a masculinist discourse based on hierarchy and coherence.

Sexualized spatial representations have recently been the subject of architectural theory as well. Most prominently, Diana Agrest has argued that male anthropomorphism had been the underlying system of Western architecture since Vitruvius. Drawing examples from Renaissance drawings and texts, Agrest shows how the ideal masculine body provided the metaphor and the reference for ideal buildings and cities. In the discourse of leading Renaissance architects such as Alberti, Filarete, and Francesco di Giorgio, the human figure is equated with the male figure which is naturalized as the ideal form. At first sight, Agrest’s arguments seem to be in contrast with those who equate space with women. However, in Agrest’s examples it is the *ideal* buildings and cities that are marked with masculine references. Those are planned spaces under total control of the architect and planner, not living organisms. In fact, at least in one instance, Renaissance theorist Poggio Bracciolini refers to the fallen city of Rome as feminine. It seems that in architectural discourse, lived space polluted with bodies, uncontrolled discourses, and the chaos of everyday life features as feminine. Ideal space, on the other hand, which is well controlled and bounded, is marked as male.

What about domestic space in particular? What is the architectural language of domesticity? How does gender figure in that language? The association of woman with the house has a long history in the Western architectural
tradition. From the ancient Greek notion of the oikos, the house has been women’s space. Furthermore, this space is marked by nurturing connotations inscribed with love and care. Therefore, it is not only the body of woman that is associated with the house, but the house itself is inscribed with maternal feminine qualifications. How are these qualifications linked to the materiality of the house and the body of woman? Which house and which woman?

Architectural theorist Mark Wigley tackles the relationship between the house and philosophical discourse from a slightly different angle. He argues that since Plato, the house has always been the exemplar of “the metaphysics of presence” — that is, pure interiority. In that sense it is a metaphor of that which precedes metaphor. Wigley explains:

As the traditional figure of an interior divided from an exterior it [the house] is used to establish a general opposition between an inner world of presence and an outer world of representation that is then used to exclude that very figure as a “mere” metaphor, a representation to be discarded to the outside of philosophy. But the figure always resists such an exclusion. Inasmuch as the condition of metaphor is established by the metaphor of the house, the house is not simply another metaphor that can be discarded. And, more than this, although metaphor is understood as a departure from the house, it is still not a departure from housing.

In this argument, the figure of the house as the ultimate marker of interiority sets the very condition of metaphorical operations. Every metaphor marks a removal from a presumed essence that is associated with the house. What, then, does it mean for woman to become the metaphor for the house? Is it perhaps a particular construction of the figure of woman rather than the house that establishes the condition of metaphor? What are the mechanisms that relate woman and house? Wigley cites Rousseau in stating that language is not of domestic origin but is acquired “by the men outside the hut.” Man who acquires language outside builds the house. The house is then elevated to architectural status. Men’s language is written over the silent space of the originary house. As such, the house becomes the property of men and, being brought into the realm of representation, it is domesticated.

Women on the other hand, represent nature, the body, sexuality, the unthought, and the unthinkable in the Western metaphysical tradition. In short, they too appear outside and beyond (men’s) language. Yet at the same time women are signified by the paternal law. As Lacanian feminists argue, they are both the subjects and the instruments of the law and the guarantors of its perpetuation. Irigaray insists that there is no place for women in the house of language:
What remains unthought is that dwelling is the fundamental trait of man’s condition. It still remains unsaid, hidden in language, which, nevertheless, expresses it: in silence. This fundamental character of man’s relation to the spoken – man’s dwelling in language, in a language as the framing for a home of and for man – is forgotten in what is habitual.26

Women’s symbolic homelessness and the search for the voice of the feminine has been an ongoing theme of investigation by such theorists as Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Helene Cixous. In philosophical and architectural discourses, notions of home, language, and sexuality intertwine in complex metaphorical operations, the dismantling of which is also the dismantling of the domestication of woman. The link between domesticity and domestication is too often hidden by our naturalized use of feminized spatial metaphors. The connections between the linguistic and philosophical violence done to femininity and physical violence done to women can hardly be overlooked.

What, then, are the strategies to overcome the burden of domestication that is associated with domestic space? How can we speak of about domesticity without collapsing back into our naturalized architectural metaphors that feminize domestic space in masculine terms? It may be useful to examine the mechanisms of the phallocentric discourse more closely before discarding its terms. Sue Best calls attention to an underlying anxiety in the production of feminized metaphors:

feminizing space seems to suggest, on the one hand, the production of a safe, familiar, clearly defined entity, which, because it is female, should be appropriately docile or able to be dominated. But, on the other hand, this very same production also underscores an anxiety about this “entity” and the precariousness of its boundaries.27

The anxiety that is embedded in domesticity is well explored within the framework of the Freudian notion of the uncanny, which has strong associations with the female figure.28 Perhaps it is precisely the recognition of this anxiety that promises the opening of hitherto unexplored terrains to theorize domesticity and domestic space, for the very precariousness of the boundaries of feminized space promise unbounded territories beyond the propriety, regulation, and control that are exercised by patriarchal discourses and practices. The critical strategy, then, is neither to negate domesticity nor to look for a place beyond. The idea is to reclaim the femininity of domesticity in terms other than enclosure, domination, and control – that is, to speak about domesticity in “other” terms.29
Materiality

In the humanist tradition, the unitary subject is the originator and creator of space. Architects, planners, and other design professionals make livable spaces provided with control, order, and regulation. This is similar to the humanist notion of language. As feminist critic Elizabeth Grosz puts it, “the humanist privileges the self as the origin and destination of discourse. Discourse, art, representation are forms of communication, messages representing one self (the author, the first person) to another (the listener, the second person.)”30 There is another model of language, however, which takes “the signifying chain as the medium of exchange, and the subject, not as the source of discourse, but as the locus through which the discourse is spoken.”31 In other words, the speaking subject is also spoken by the language s/he speaks. By taking place in language, the subject submits her/himself to social law – in psychoanalytic terms the symbolic order.

One can theorize space in similar terms as it is one of the principal components of the symbolic order. At one level, one may immediately say that social law is acted out in space. At another level however, space is the medium of the production of social law.32 It is never neutral, empty, or meaningless. Here I am less concerned with the symbolic meanings that are attributed to certain spaces (such as the Christian symbolism of a church interior) than the very materiality of space. The latter is the medium of intersubjective encounters. In simple terms, walls separate subjects, room arrangements create hierarchies, and thresholds allow passages. The formality of a law court, for example, puts subjects “in place” – that is, it enables the naming of subjects according to the place they occupy in a given spatial arrangement. The spatial arrangement of the classroom empowers the teacher, and so on. Perhaps the best known example in this context is Michel Foucault’s analysis of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon – a circular prison building with a watchtower at the center overlooking the cells at the periphery. Foucault explains:

[The Panopticon] is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction, must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use.33

What is important for our purposes in Foucault’s analysis is his emphasis on the materiality of space in the production of power relations between subjects, and ultimately becoming “a figure of political technology.” This example opens up productive questions in our interest. First, how do domesticity and gender enter into the complicated equation between spatiality and intersubjective
relations? Second, how does the agency of the “victimized” figure in the tight weave of the “political technology” of space? And is such a figuration possible at first place?

The domestic sphere is arguably the most potent place to explore the spatiality of gendered power relations. The spatial order of the house enables certain familial encounters and disables others. It regulates the seen and the unseen in the symbolic order of domesticity which, as I indicated above, is the order of the father. In domestic space, proper places of familial order such as conversation, dining, and study are separated from improper ones such as sexuality, dirt, and hygiene. The architecture of the single-family house is a mechanism that engineers domesticity. It orders gender, generation, race, and class relations by assigning proper places to its occupants. As John Biln puts it, “clearly a vast system of signals, symbols, myths, stories, memories, objects and images work to recall the role-mappings of spaces such as kitchens and living rooms.” Such role mappings are materially inscribed into the spatial order of the house. The spatial hierarchy of the bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, study, and living room not only separates the private and the public, but also woman’s and man’s spheres. Biln’s narration is exemplary in this respect:

Since, as we know, “a woman’s place is in the home”, it is perhaps appropriate to consider what happens when she traverses the home, that is when she traces paths in place [. . .] Now, in routine circumstance, a “woman’s” spatial journey from private, personal and “backstage” activities to public, social and “frontfacing” ones conventionally involves a movement from bed/bath, on the one hand, to kitchen/entry, on the other [. . .] This choreograph works through its toponym to map a transformation from one site-specific social role to another, that is from wife to mother, or to use Luce Irigaray’s more pointed terminology, from prostitute (to virgin) to mother.

If the architecture of domesticity routinely reproduces certain social subjects and the relations between them, how is it possible to break the cycle? I would argue that the key to answer this question lies in our capability to see and act out the materiality of space differently from the way we are trained to do. Indeed, domestic space can be imagined outside the dictates of standard architectural types and given choreographies of single-family households. Space is the outcome of the mutual inscriptions of the materiality of architecture and gendered subjectivity. Since the subject is always already psychically inscribed, spatial discourses and practices are inevitably marked by desire. As psychoanalytical theory puts it, in symbolic identification there is
always a leftover which opens the space for desire and makes the symbolic order inconsistent. What, then, are the inconsistencies of our disciplinary constructions of domestic space? Where do the silenced desires of women and other marginalized identities erupt? What are the material traces of such eruptions?

These are methodological questions that call for some elaboration on the economy of the field of vision in relation to architecture. As Kaja Silverman explains, in psychoanalytic theory the field of vision consists of three elements – the gaze, the look, and the screen. The gaze marks the place from where we are seen. Not attached to a specific subject, it is nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Silverman explains it as “the manifestation of the symbolic within the field of vision” and “the unapprehensible agency through which we are socially ratified or negated as spectacle.” The gaze is associated with “the presence of others as such.” It is different from the look which is connected to the human eye. The look is not only a visual but also a psychic category. Being an embodied entity, it is always inscribed by desire. The screen is the term which mediates between the gaze and the look. Objects and subjects enter the field of vision via the screen that gives significance to how we perceive the world. Consisting of representations, the screen is a reminder that there is no immediate visual access to anything that exists out there. Also, it marks “the site at which social and historical difference enter the field of vision.”

What I find most valuable in Silverman’s interpretation of the visual field is her notion of the productive look as opposed to what is given-to-be-seen. The latter is related to normative representations on the screen which are constituted by the “dominant fiction” – that is, what passes for reality – in a given society. These representations are meant to be seen and affirmed from a particular spectatorial position. However, Silverman emphasizes the possibility of seeing something other than what is given-to-be-seen. This depends on the look’s creative potential to occupy a different viewing position with respect to the screen to see in ways that are not entirely predefined. From an architectural viewpoint, the gaze is the manifestation of the canon within the visual field of built objects. The way we perceive and practice the materiality of architectural space is affirmed or negated by the gaze. When we look at the screen of domestic spaces from the proper viewing position, we know how to appreciate and use them. Silverman’s argument of the productive look theorizes the possibility of other possible viewing positions of domestic environments that enable alternative practices.

John Biln’s analysis of Stephen Hall’s Oceanfront House and Beatriz Colomina’s work on Adolf Loos’ Moller and Müller Houses are inspiring examples of alternative spatial practices. Biln points out certain features of the Oceanfront House which disrupt naturalized domestic choreographies.
explains how the spatial configuration there goes against the conventional house that keeps various spatial definitions of woman distinct from each other. In the Oceanfront House, the physical, visual, and audial intersections between customarily self-contained spaces render negotiable the social role of the woman as mother, lover, and housewife. Biln states that “Holl’s project puts the social subject into a potentially emancipatory instability in which social inscription, indeed the very definitions of the social self, are temporarily bracketed.” Colomina, on the other hand, focuses on the raised alcove of the Moller House and the lady’s room of the Müller House, which function like theater boxes overlooking other internal spaces. She points to the production of intimacy and control in those particular spatial configurations that empower their respective occupants.

These examples illustrate alternative architectural practices that subvert conventional spatial configurations. As outcomes of unconventional and inspiring readings of domestic spaces, they show how the materiality of space can undermine and hence potentially transform given choreographies of gender. To build and detect such spaces requires the capability to see other than what is given to be seen by the social symbolic realm in general and the architectural discipline in particular. The materiality of space is located within the symbolic order, but it also has the potential to alter the latter’s phallocentric premises.

**Conclusion**

In broad outlines, spatial practices involve discourses on space, the interaction of bodies in and with space, and the material substance that constitutes space. These practices are by and large located in the symbolic sphere governed by the Law of the Father. The notions of domestic space as a private enclosure associated with woman and the spatial hierarchies that govern the single-family (read white, middle-/upper-class) household are largely absorbed and naturalized by the architectural discipline. Once the insidious operations of sexuality in given architectural categories are unpacked, ideas on domesticity, agency, and spatial materiality flee from their familiar terrains of hierarchy, regulation, and control.

From this kind of argument, the very notion of domesticity seems to emerge as a negative category where sexual identities are compartmentalized, gender roles are solidified, and the female element is repressed. Indeed, the symbolic identification of domesticity is based on these premises. However, my argument is that this does not necessarily have to be so. As illustrated by a number of examples above, domesticity is not a notion to be discarded, but one that needs to be thought about differently. In that quest, I am interested in appropriative strategies that are suggested by a number of authors. Sue Best, for example, calls for reclaiming the femininity of space.
She privileges the silent space of repetition and reproduction against the masculine attributes of change, discontinuity, and production. For her, feminine space is enabling, inviting, and open-ended. It is a space of becoming. Best’s invitation comes close to the strategy of mimetical appropriation suggested by Irigaray who asks women to resubmit themselves to masculine ideas about themselves in order to make visible what was supposed to remain invisible. In terms of the discourse on domesticity, Hilde Heynen sees mimesis as a useful concept to transform the meaning of the house based on porosity, transparency, mobility, adaptability, and flexibility.46

Notions of mimesis and repetition, which are key to these scholars’ work, point to a previous state which needs to be reappropriated – that is, appropriated differently. I find the psychoanalytical category of the imaginary particularly useful in the interest of reappropriating domesticity in feminine terms. The imaginary sphere is based on the Lacanian concept of the mirror image, where the reflected image is marked by a coherence that the subject lacks. Kaja Silverman states that rather than establishing the differences that enable social existence, the imaginary sphere mobilizes the discovery of correspondences and homologies.47 At one level, it is the precursor of the symbolic sphere where the principles of identity, non-contradiction, and binarism are symbolized. Irigaray proposes an alternative way of thinking the imaginary, however. What she identifies as the female imaginary holds the promise of a space of multiplicity and becoming which may involve radical modes of intervention in the symbolic.48

The female imaginary is the unsymbolized, repressed side of Western philosophy. It is fluid, formless, and mobile; something which does not yet exist, which is yet to be created. I think that the notion of domesticity can be symbolized through a female imaginary that may productively unsettle the given categories of our social and architectural practices. Such an attempt calls for the reappropriation of the imaginary sphere to understand domesticity by metaphors of fluidity and mobility, and by its indifference to the laws of identity, hierarchy, and control. This strategy involves both the deconstruction of masculine metaphors and the affirmative deconstruction of feminine ones by all agents who participate in the discourses and practices of domesticity. The notion of the female imaginary reminds us that the domestic realm needs not to be discarded but reclaimed in different terms.

The following essays focus on historically specific constructions of the domestic realm from largely unexplored angles. The collection in this volume remains necessarily partial in its geographical and temporal scope. Much work remains to be done in broader historical and theoretical explorations of domesticity, especially in the processes of colonial encounters and decolonization. This volume is meant to be a step towards imagining domesticity in critical and potentially liberating terms.
Notes
2 For one of the most recent examples of informative work, see the articles in the theme issue, “Architecture, Gender, Domesticity,” guest ed. Hilde Heynen, *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 7, no. 3, Autumn 2002.
4 I have argued elsewhere how the 1960s fascination with vernacular and indigenous buildings did not necessarily involve the questioning of disciplinary boundaries. See Gülsüm Baydar Nalbantog˘lu, “Beyond Lack and Excess: Other Architecture, Other Landscapes,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, September 2000, pp. 20–27.
6 Ibid., p. 334.
7 Natalie Kampen and Elizabeth G. Grossman state that women architects and feminists from other disciplines as well as architectural historians began writing about women in architecture in the 1970s. While the first concentrated on the discrimination that had kept women out of education and practice, historians studied career profiles of women architects and women’s role in the production of built spaces. See “Feminism and Methodology: Dynamics of Change in the History of Art and Architecture,” Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Working Paper no. 122, 1983.
9 Hayden’s *The Grand Domestic Revolution* is on the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American material feminists who proposed a complete transformation of homes, neighborhoods, and cities. Hayden argues that focusing on socialized housework and child-care, this group concentrated on both economic and spatial issues at an unprecedented scale. She narrates how material feminists targeted the split between domestic and public life created by industrial capitalism and sought for spatial transformations to end women’s exploitation.
10 Alice Friedman’s investigation of the role of single women as client and muse in the making of paradigmatic modern houses and Phyllis Palmer’s work on domestic servants in the US are leading examples in that vein. See Alice Friedman, *Women and the Making of the Modern House*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998, and Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920–1945*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1989. Friedman draws our attention to the fact that many paradigmatic examples of modern architecture are houses designed for women heads of households. These independent women had a spatial and physical vision of domesticity that was different from the idealized single-family house. This included unconventional spatial arrangements that validated the non-nuclear family and women’s independent agency. Palmer, on the other hand, does not directly address the architecture of the house. However, there are explicit references that render the book important for the architectural discipline.


Ibid., p. 15.

This Lacanian concept is clearly explained in Grosz, “The Subject,” p. 411.


Best draws her examples from a broad range of references from theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva to Gaston Bachelard and Mary Douglas. Sue Best, “Sexualizing Space,” in Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn, eds, Sexy Bodies, New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 181–194.


I have dwelt on this instance extensively in “Spectral Returns of Domesticity,” Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, no. 21, 2003, pp. 27–45.


Ibid., pp. 97–122. Here Wigley engages with Martin Heidegger’s and Jacques Derrida’s positions regarding the metaphysics of presence. Siding with the latter, his argument is that metaphysics, as the privileged realm of presence, maintains the metaphorical status of the house. To remove that status is to displace the metaphysical tradition.

Ibid., p. 102.

Ibid., p. 134.


I find Sylvia Lavin’s analysis of Eileen Gray’s E.1027 very inspiring in this context. Although Lavin’s interest is not the exploration of domesticity per se, her analysis of the house in terms of mobility rather than territorialization and permanence promises the generation of new terms to speak of domestic space. See Sylvia Lavin, “Colomina’s Web,” in Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Kanes Weisman, eds, The Sex of Architecture, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996, pp. 183–190. See also Katarina Bonnevier’s contribution to this volume.


John Biln makes a similar point in “Topos and Choros: Aspects of Material Space and Social Subjectivity in Architecture,” unpublished Doctor of Design thesis, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 1991. His premise is that architectural objects are both social constructions of material space and mechanisms that spatially and symbolically construct social subjects (p. 10). His analytical framework consists of two terms: “Topography” (a material “drawing” of architectural terrain) and “choreography” (a material “notation” toward the performance of social repertoires) (p. 51).


Biln, “Topos and Choros,” p. 60. The main body of Biln’s thesis consists of three case studies of architect-designed houses (Mockbee–Coker–Howorth’s Boone, Day, and Luckett Houses, Steven Holl’s Oceanfront House and Lars Lerup’s Love/House) which do not conform to conventional models of domestic space.

Ibid., p. 131. One may add here that although “a woman’s place is in the home,” the housewife almost always “traverses” the home with no space of her own. In the single family bourgeois household the children have their own room, the husband has the study but the wife shares all the spaces with others.


Kaja Silverman, The Threshold of the Visible World, New York: Routledge, 1996, pp. 125–227. Silverman offers a lengthy explication of the Lacanian scheme regarding the gaze, the look, and the screen, in relation to film, photography and video. I find her analysis not only informative, but also inspiring to theorize the construction of the architectural field.

Ibid., pp. 68, 133.

Ibid., p. 134.

Ibid., p. 178.


Equally important are those instances when conventional spaces are acted out differently from their stated purposes. These are somewhat more difficult to detect as they are embedded in the speed and chaos of everyday life. This issue is partially addressed in a few studies that are known to me. In an inspiring essay on migrant houses in Australia, Mirjana Lozanovska explains how domestic migrant spaces and gendered subjectivities are produced in the repressive environment of a host culture. See “Abjection and Architecture: The Migrant House in Multicultural Australia,” in Gülşüm Baydar Nalbantoğlu and Wong Chong Thai, eds, Postcolonial Space(s), New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997, pp. 101–130. In an unpublished study, I theorized the notion of domesticity for the Filipino maids in Singapore by focusing on their unconventional use of urban and domestic spaces. A brief excerpt is published in Assemblage, no. 41, April 2000, p. 58.


47 Kaja Silverman, The Subject of Semiotics, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 157. According to Lacan, between the ages of six months and eighteen months, the subject identifies the self and the other based on its own reflection in a mirror for the first time. This is an ideal image external to the subject and masks the split between being and language.

Gendered subjects

The agents of spatial production are usually seen either as gender-neutral or conforming to stereotyped gender roles. Although domesticity is conventionally associated with women, for example, the builder of the house is conceived as male. Men build, women inhabit. The essays in this section challenge commonplace assumptions about gender roles in the practice of domestic spaces. They focus on the subjects who build and inhabit domestic space from a gender perspective and analyze particular values, desires, and ambitions that are projected in spatial practices. In clarifying the entanglements between, on the one hand, the process of imagining, designing, building, and inhabiting domestic spaces, and, on the other, the construction of gendered subjectivities, these essays question the too easily naturalized connections between women and domesticity. By also discussing men’s roles – as grooms, fathers, or DIY-adepts – they underscore that it is not just feminine subjectivities that are molded through domestic spaces, but also masculine ones.

Elizabeth Darling focuses on an experimental social housing project in 1930s London – the Kensal House. She analyzes the social and historical fabric in its spatial production and highlights the production of gendered subjects in this process. Her focus on one occupant, Mrs Elsie Winborn, shows the complex interweave of two seemingly disparate roles – that is, citizen and housewife – that determined the nature of her agency in a given historical context.

The other essays in this section deal with lesser known examples of modern architecture – not the “masterpieces,” but rather widely applied models or types that had a considerable influence. They show the complex relationships between gendered subjects in the production of common domestic environments in different geographies. Ioanna Theocharopoulou looks at a non-architect designed building type in postwar Athens – the polykatoikia apartment. Analyzing the intricate relationship between the various actors/actresses that participated in the production and use of these apartments, she focuses on how the polikatoikia phenomenon posited a challenge to existing power relations across class and gender lines.
Fredie Floré casts light on the Christian Workers’ Movement in postwar Belgium and their ideals of “good homes” amid the uneasy relationship between Christian morality and the rapidly changing society. She clearly delineates the separate functions of men’s and women’s agencies in the construction of the ideal home environment. Barbara Penner’s essay surveys postwar honeymoon resorts in Pennsylvania. She looks at domesticity as “a publicly formed and changing set of attitudes, values and skills revolving around the home . . . which are then learned, negotiated or performed by individuals over time.” The honeymoon resorts are analyzed as stage sets to play out an idealized domestic life and gender roles.

These contributions are as much about spatial politics as about the production and use of space by gendered subjects. By focusing on the complicated relationship between various agents – male and female – in the making and inhabiting of the modern house, they surface the complex nature of power hierarchies across gender and generation divides. This enterprise entails the questioning of such disciplinary assumptions as the architect as master subject and the house as the product of its designer. As such, the contributions to this section explore territorial politics on the one hand and the politics of the architectural discipline on the other.
“A citizen as well as a housewife”
New spaces of domesticity in 1930s London

Elizabeth Darling

Introduction
In July 1942, the British National Government extended its rationing programme to include home furnishings and set up the Utility Furniture Advisory Committee (UFAC) to oversee specifications for the design and manufacture of the resulting products. This Committee would control the production of furniture and other household goods in Britain until it was wound up in 1952; it thus had a substantial influence on the material culture of everyday life in Britain and remains an important episode in its design history.

Given its significance, it is surprising how little studied UFAC has been. While the basic history and chronology of the Utility programme has been established, and some more detailed discussion of different aspects of the programme made, there have been few, if any, attempts to analyze the membership of a Committee that had such considerable power for a decade. It is this overlooked aspect of UFAC, and the identity and very presence on the committee of one member in particular, which is the starting point for this chapter.

The members of the Utility Furniture Advisory Committee
The establishment of UFAC was formally announced on July 8, 1942 by Hugh Dalton, the President of the Board of Trade. Under the chairmanship of
Sir Charles Tennyson, vice-chairman of the Council for Art and Industry and an industrialist, the Committee comprised eight members. Of these, three were furniture manufacturers (W. Johnstone, Herman Lebus, and V. Welsford); one was a designer (Gordon Russell); two were design consultants (John Gloag and Elizabeth Denby) and the remaining two were representatives of the consumers who would use Utility products (the Reverend Charles Jenkinson and Mrs E. Winborn). The Committee would subsequently invite designers to submit designs for consideration and, ultimately, commissioning.

As its name suggests, UFAC’s role was advisory, its purpose to evaluate the suitability of designs from two points of view. First, and primarily, all Utility goods had to meet the exigencies of wartime production conditions when materials were scarce or liable to be withdrawn at a moment’s notice if needed for the munitions program. It is not surprising, then, that of the members, manufacturers were in the majority (here I include Tennyson in my reckoning). They had the experience and expertise to judge whether the proposed furniture, for example, could meet contemporary manufacturing conditions. Second, and here the other members of the Committee came to the fore, UFAC also exercised what Jules Lubbock has characterized, rather exaggeratedly, as a form of sumptuary law.

Like Lubbock and other historians, I share the view that the Utility programme should be understood as a further episode in the campaign to “convert” Britons to the virtues of “Good Design.” What was so significant about Utility was that the war provided the ideal opportunity, because it was state-backed, to control this process very precisely. Utility products would be the only new goods available to consumers. At last, well-designed products were guaranteed to find their way into a large number of homes.

A glimpse at the names Russell, Gloag, and Denby would have clearly signaled such intentions to contemporaries. All had spent the 1930s campaigning for design reform. Denby and Russell had both been involved with the activities of the Council for Art and Industry (CAI), the main prewar government body that had been charged with the promotion of good design. Tennyson, UFAC’s chairman, was, of course, also the head of the CAI. Gloag, a leading member of the Design and Industries Association, had written and broadcast extensively on the benefits of well-designed everyday objects. Russell, as a furniture designer and maker, also had the additional ability to stand alongside the manufacturer members of UFAC.

The presence of Denby, Gloag, and Russell on UFAC also fitted in with the wider tendency in wartime, especially in debates about reconstruction, to draw on expert opinion as the basis for future policy-making. Similarly, the inclusion of the final two members, Jenkinson and Winborn, reflected a practice that had begun to emerge towards the end of the 1930s: a direct
engagement with public opinion through survey, interview, and, in UFAC’s case, the incorporation of consumer representatives on its board.5

Of these two members, the appointment of Charles Jenkinson seems to have been because of his position as a prominent anti-slum campaigner in the 1930s.6 His protests against slum conditions in Leeds had led its city council to build some of the most modern and well-equipped social housing of the decade, notably the flats at Quarry Hill which were opened in March 1938.7 Jenkinson, then, had a good understanding of the working-class home and the economics of its furnishing. But what of his fellow consumer representative, Mrs E. Winborn: who was she? Of all those who served on UFAC, her presence has been remarked upon the least, yet she is, perhaps, its most interesting member.

Mrs E. Winborn
Surviving minutes of UFAC meetings show Winborn’s regular attendance and that on at least two occasions she influenced its decision-making. It was on her suggestion that the Utility kitchen cabinet had doors over the shelves and no cradle was provided for nurseries since, she said, “the working woman would find a cot adequate.”8

It was not unusual at this date for women to be involved in government-appointed committees. Octavia Hill had given evidence to the 1884 Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes while, during World War I, a Women’s Sub-Committee had been appointed by the Minister of Reconstruction to investigate what form postwar housing might take.9 During 1936 and 1937, Mrs Winborn’s fellow UFAC member, Elizabeth Denby, served on a sub-committee of the CAI which investigated the furnishing of the working-class home, a presence that had made her membership of UFAC almost inevitable.10 In wartime, many women were appointed members of, or invited as witnesses to, the countless committees that debated plans for Britain’s reconstruction. In one respect, then, Mrs Winborn’s presence on UFAC could be said to be expected, especially since she was there to represent the voice of the consumer, always seen as a traditional area of woman’s expertise. In fact, her membership was far more out of the ordinary than has been understood.

Unlike the upper and, latterly, middle-class women whose voices were heard on government committees and who invariably spoke for the needs of working-class women (the 1916 Women’s Sub-Committee, for example), Elsie Winborn was a working-class housewife. In the press release of 1942 she is listed as a member of the tenants’ committee of the Kensal House Estate, a block of working-class flats in west London.11 This was, perhaps, the first time that a woman of the laboring classes was a member of, rather than a witness to, a government committee. Further, as already noted,
this was a working-class woman who would have a direct influence on policy-making, an influence that extended to the homes of those who bought Utility kitchen cabinets and cots. How and why did this ordinary woman come to do such an extraordinary thing?

The suggestion here is that it had everything to do with where she lived and her fellow UFAC member, Elizabeth Denby. Kensal House is a very rare prewar example of modernist workers’ housing in Britain (Figure 3.1). In both plan and form it had much more in common with the siedlungen of continental Europe than it did with contemporary social housing in Britain. The former slum dwellers who moved into the estate when it was opened in March 1937 were given homes planned on existenz-minimum, labor-saving lines, extensive social amenities (two clubs, a nursery, allotments) and a management policy that relied on the tenants for the day-to-day running of the blocks. It was, as one of its designers observed, “no ordinary block of working-class flats.”

Kensal House was commissioned in 1933 by the Gas, Light & Coke Company (GLCC), one of England’s largest public utility companies. Motivated by competition from the newly emergent electrical industry, the project was conceived, initially, as a model estate that would demonstrate the cheapness and efficacy of gas as both fuel and appliance. Under the guidance of the
company’s Director, David Milne Watson, and its designers, the architect Max Fry and housing consultant Elizabeth Denby, however, it became much more than that. Although it still incorporated the company’s products (down to a gas iron in each kitchen), it was also intended as a solution to “the problem of providing the right living conditions for re-housed slum dwellers.” For Denby and Fry, Kensal House would be a didactic setting in which new forms, new technology, and progressive discourse together would create modern citizens able to participate fully in contemporary life.

It was into this environment that Mrs Winborn and her family moved in 1937. Although, as will be shown, Kensal House was intended as a vehicle through which all its inhabitants could attain citizenship, given my focus on her and the preoccupations of this volume, my concern is to stress the gendered nature of this nurturing of citizenship through the transformation of space and living practices. Further, I want to suggest that this represented a negotiation of domesticity since the designers’ intentions were contrary to much contemporary writing on this subject.

Through a discussion of discourses of citizenship and domesticity then current, and an analysis of the spaces of Kensal House and the activities they were intended to facilitate, my purpose is to show how, in sharp contrast to continental Europe, the radical reconfiguration of the domestic interior had a very different purpose in Britain. As Susan Henderson has shown, for example, in her study of the New Frankfurt, the rationalization of the dwelling was intended as a means to (re)domesticate working-class women and create a generation of “professional” housewives and mothers. These reformed women were meant to stay firmly inside their transformed homes.

In the British discourses and spaces discussed here, the re-forming of the private sphere was seen not simply as a device through which women could be transformed into efficient housewives and mothers. As Denby herself put it, the increase in leisure and time which resulted from a labor-saving dwelling would free women not to tend to their families but instead “... to take part in all the other sides of life – the life of the mind and the spirit.” They would be enabled to bring their insights as a housewives and mothers into the public realm. Thus, every woman could become “a citizen as well as a housewife.”

How to make a citizen as well as a housewife: discourses of citizenship and domesticity in 1930s Britain

The suggestion here is that Kensal House, although it displayed typological similarities with modernist housing in continental Europe, was born from a very different set of ideological concerns. These, I suggest, were rooted in a peculiarly British (perhaps Anglo-Saxon) concern for democracy and citizenship. Here, it should be remembered that in Britain, equal adult suffrage had
been achieved only in 1928 when women over 21 years old were given the vote. Furthermore, in the years when Kensal House was being designed and built, between 1933 and 1936, Britain increasingly found itself as one of the few countries in Europe whose government was untouched by extreme politics. In such a context, the preservation and enhancement of a democratic state was vital and the bringing to active citizenship of the largest section of society, its working classes, equally so.

The debate about citizenship was further inflected by developments within British feminist politics and the emergence of New Feminism in the inter-war period. In contrast to Old Feminism, which had been preoccupied with the attainment of equal suffrage and access to the professions, adherents of New Feminism were less interested in equal opportunities than the chance for each gender to develop its different qualities and attributes to the maximum potential. Somewhat ironically, New Feminists tended to be middle-class women who had benefited from Old Feminist campaigns and gained access to the public realm through engagement with local politics or membership of the professions, although they tended to cluster in areas of “women’s work,” such as housing reform or medicine. Nevertheless, they used these positions to campaign for reforms which would enable working-class women to develop first as housewives and mothers and then to bring these nurturing qualities to the public realm through the development of their political sensibilities.

Such practices were embodied in the work of Elizabeth Denby and there can be little doubt that it was she who brought these concerns to bear on the design of Kensal House. She described herself as a housing consultant: an independent housing expert who would advise on and, where possible, carry out the programming, design, furnishing, and management of workers’ housing. Equipped with ten years’ experience in the voluntary housing sector, she became an independent professional in 1933 and first made her name as an expert with a series of articles on labor-saving kitchens. Before she collaborated on the programming and design of Kensal House, she had co-designed with Max Fry a smaller block of workers’ flats, R.E. Sassoon House in South London, which displayed a similar concern for the matching of advanced plan forms with new types of social activity. These were provided by the health-cum-leisure club, the Pioneer Health Centre, to which it stood adjacent.

To understand better the peculiarly British interpretation of the discourse of labor-saving which Denby embodied, I shall refer to a discussion in which she participated in the Domestic Section of the Sixth International Congress for Scientific Management, held in London in July 1935. This Congress was the sixth to be held and organized by a committee that included the Director of the GLCC, David Milne Watson. Delegates came
predominantly from Europe and the US with speakers from the fascist nations of Italy and Germany being particularly well represented. The two substantial volumes of papers and proceedings that were published subsequently – and on which I draw here – demonstrate how pervasive the theory of Scientific Management had become by the 1930s and how widely it was seen as a way of modernizing not just the home but all aspects of industry.25

The Domestic Section was presided over by the well-known American expert in Scientific Management, Dr Lillian Gilbreth, and comprised four sessions, each with its own president and a rapporteur. Denby gave her paper in the tortuously titled session “The Role of Organized Services Outside the Home in Relation to Scientific Management in the Home.”26 Like many of the British women who contributed papers to this discussion, Denby did not just speak about the mechanics of Scientific Management. In an address that otherwise considered the role of communal laundries in lessening the housewife’s workload, she took the opportunity to question the ultimate purpose of such labor-saving facilities for women. They would, she said, provide them with more leisure but, she asked, “Leisure for what?”27

As far as Denby was concerned, the leisure made possible by the rationalization of household work should not necessarily be put to domestic or familial ends. Instead, it might also mean that the housewife could go out to work or put her mind to more esoteric pursuits. As Denby said, and to complete the quotation made earlier, “the ultimate aim of improvement in material things is perhaps to free the individual to take part in the other sides of life – the life of the mind and the spirit.” This, I suggest, is a very British way of conceptualizing the purpose of reform. For Denby, and many of her contemporaries, material improvements had a spiritual dimension, a “higher purpose” perhaps. This belief would permeate the design and management of Kensal House.28

Such an attitude was, however, in direct opposition to the views of her fellow speaker, a representative of National Socialist Germany. Dr Ingenieur Herbert Mueller declared: “German women will not know the word “leisure”. Scientific Management frees them to save her time for the men and the children.”29

That Denby’s ideas formed part of a wider British understanding of the purpose of Scientific Management becomes clear in the words of the rapporteur of her session. Lady Shena Simon, a prominent Labour politician, was even more emphatic about what Scientific Management made possible. Like the New Feminist she was, she argued that the application of technology in the private sphere meant that “the special experience of women as well as the experience of men” could, indeed should, be brought to bear on the public sphere. She demanded that the newly leisured woman should think of herself as “a citizen as well as a housewife,” especially given the times in
which she was living. Her conclusions about the meanings and purpose of Scientific Management are, in the context of this paper’s concerns, significant. She wrote:

We are indeed at the dawn of a new phase in civilization, for, from the beginning of history until the present day, the home has been the provision of the housewife – and now, thanks to the advancement of science, the door is ajar, and the housewife is on the threshold.

In reality, the discourse of scientific management in Britain was more usually applied to the homes of the now servantless middle classes and the houses in Britain’s rapidly developing suburbia that some more affluent members of the working classes could afford to buy. Simon and Denby were rather optimistic in their estimation of the number of working women who were able to leap over the threshold to a new civilization. The truth was, as their contemporary, the social commentator Margery Spring Rice, observed in her seminal 1939 study, Working Class Wives, that:

The rationalisation of labour has passed over the working woman, leaving her to carry on in more or less the same primitive way that has been customary since time began; never specialising and seldom learning real skill in any of her dozens of different jobs.

Spring Rice shared with Simon and Denby the New Feminist belief that at the same time as women should be helped to improve their work as housewives and mothers, they should also develop as individuals. In her book she argued that a central means by which this goal could be achieved was a reformed domestic architecture. Deeply critical of what she characterized as the English determination to preserve the integrity of the family and “to keep it as a whole as separate as possible from other families and from any outside intrusion,” she clearly envisaged a more communal and community-oriented form of housing. The obstacle to this, Spring Rice observed, was the lamentable government policy of building cottages rather than flats. These occupied space that might otherwise have been “... laid out in ornamental gardens, playing grounds, swimming pools, and all sorts of workshops, recreational and domestic for women as well as men and children.”

To underscore her case, Spring Rice included a series of photographic plates of projects that embodied the reforms for which she argued. Among these, Plate 14 is of particular interest for it shows “the Community Centre in a new block of flats in W London”. This was, in fact, part of Kensal House. Its inclusion suggests that contemporaries well understood Denby’s
ambitions for it. Through the estate’s combination of spaces reshaped by the discourse of Scientific Management and the enactment of particular living practices, it would serve as an environment that would enable its women tenants, in particular, to engage with the life of the mind and the spirit and step over the threshold into public life.

In order to effect this renegotiation of domesticity, Denby and her co-designer Fry had to pay meticulous attention to the design of every detail of the estate. This began with the private sphere of each family’s flat and then extended to the public sphere of the estate’s communal facilities and amenities, and the management practices that were developed by Denby. Here, I want to explore each level of this negotiation, from the private to the public, to show precisely how the tenants, and one in particular, were trained for full participation in modern life.

“To secure serenity and privacy in the home life of the tenants”[35]

In the design of the flats – 68 in three blocks – Denby and Fry were informed by a desire to reinstate and foster family life, something that was difficult to experience in the one- and two-roomed dwellings from which many Kensal House tenants came. The flats were intended as a “stage” for the acting out of specific roles within the family. In them the mother could learn to be a better housewife and mother, the father could affirm his role as bread-winner and paterfamilias, and their companionship could be enhanced. At the same time, it provided a better environment in which their children could grow up and, in turn, learn their gendered role in life.

Fundamental to this process was the enhancement of the family’s sense of privacy and ownership, qualities that are hard to maintain in a slum dwelling. This began with the planning of each block on the principle of direct staircase access to each flat rather than by balcony access, a practice that was common in contemporary state social housing (Figure 3.2). This avoided the problem of people walking past a family’s flat on the way to their own home and also allowed each resident to have their own territory on the landing space. Once inside, the tenant entered a flat which was then designed to provide everything that was lacking in the slum: space, further privacy, and cleanliness.

Each flat contained either two or three bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen with drying balcony, and a living room with a sun balcony. Like the existenz-minimum projects of continental Europe in which it had its origins, the plan correlated the size of rooms to their function and eschewed the use of dust-gathering moldings. As in Frankfurt or Rotterdam, these spaces were also highly gendered, especially the kitchen.

There can be little doubt that the Kensal House kitchens were intended as the housewives’ training ground and workshop. A publicity leaflet issued by the GLCC pointedly compared Kensal House’s kitchens with what
was available elsewhere and noted that badly designed equipment made women “worse housewives and mothers than they might otherwise be”. Clearly influenced by, although not nearly sophisticated as, Schutte-Lihotzky’s Frankfurter-Küche, women tenants were given an extremely well-equipped and well-designed kitchen for social housing of this period with the space zoned into areas for food preparation, cooking, and also laundry. Fry would later observe: “In this little kitchen the important work of the house is carried on without disturbing the life of the living room and with a lighter mind for that blessing.”

If the kitchen were the space where women tenants (re)learnt their skills as housewives and mothers, then the adjacent living room was intended as the space where family life would be fostered (Figure 3.3). It was the largest room in the flat at 20 meters square. Family meals would have to be eaten here, as the kitchen was too small to hold a table. This strengthened the notion that the living room should be the location for the daily coming together of the family. A coke fire provided the modern equivalent of the family hearth and, since it could not be used for cooking, further reinforced the idea that the living room was just for living.

The living room also contained a wireless speaker. This location was surely to reinforce this space as one for family congregation. Its position above the coke fire was then significant: the combination of heat and entertainment – a modernist inglenook – would draw the family together.

Leading from the living room was the main bedroom; the children’s rooms were accessed from the hall corridor. At the same time as this reduced the need for circulation space, it also meant that once the children had gone to
bed, the parents, in effect, had the zone of the living room and their bedroom to themselves. And, of course, the very fact that parents had sleeping space to themselves was important. The difficulty of living a full married life in slum housing and the impact this had on marriages was widely discussed at this time. Progressive reformers such as Spring Rice and those behind the Pioneer Health Centre were concerned that husbands and wives should be enabled to develop companionate relationships as well as their skills as parents.38

The final element of the flats’ design was the sun balcony. This was a surrogate garden for the tenants and also served to relieve the closed-in feeling of living in a flat. At 2.5 meters by 1.5 meters, it was designed to be large enough to hold a table or give sufficient space for children to play within sight of their mother. A deep window-box was fixed into the balconies for tenants to use for growing plants and vegetables. Each balcony also offered the families a view of their estate: kings and queens of all they surveyed.

A re-formed and reforming private dwelling would enable each individual to assume its appropriate role within the family and would thus put them into the position to take on their role within their community as a whole. For women occupants like Mrs Winborn, the labor-saving flat would free her from drudgery in order that she could participate in the estate’s communal life. The public spaces of Kensal House were then designed with as much care as the flats. The aim was to facilitate the formation of a sense of community and, once it was formed, allow it to flourish. This in turn would act as a training ground for contribution to the public realm outside. This required two types of

3.3
Kensal House: living room
provision: the “designing in” of certain types of social amenities, as well as the implementation of particular management practices.

“The spirit of the estate is that the tenants run it themselves”\textsuperscript{39}

A great help in facilitating the sense of community at Kensal House was its site (Figure 3.4). It was enclosed by the Great Western Railway to the south, the Grand Union Canal to the north, a gas-holder to the west (the site had formed part of a GLCC gasworks) and Ladbroke Grove to the east, and a ground level which was lower than the road. To traverse the walkway into Kensal House was to gain access to a new world.

As tenants walked across the bridge to the main block, they entered a public realm that contained two social clubs, a nursery school, and allotments. Of these, two locations were particularly important in the facilitation of the women’s access to the life of the mind and the spirit: the nursery school and the adults’ social club.

All children on the estate could go to nursery school from 8 am to 5 pm, which left their mothers with further free time in addition to that provided by their rationalized dwelling (most did not go out to work). I shall return to where the women could spend this time, but it should be noted that the nursery school also served as an important training ground for the nation’s future citizens.

The social practices taught to the children at the school were complementary to the modern spaces they inhabited. Each day was strictly ordered with regular naps and meals. All the children were encouraged to take responsibility for themselves and others, something Sir Ernest Simon, Liberal politician, social commentator, and husband of Shena Simon, believed was one of the four basic principles of citizenship.\textsuperscript{40} Children took turns to serve
each other at lunchtime and each had their own cupboard and coat-hook to encourage a sense of ownership and care.

While the smallest inhabitants of Kensal House were being trained in good habits, their mothers were expected to retire to one of the two social clubs on the estate. Built into the basement level of the east block, the Feathers Club, as it was called, was for the adult occupants. During the day, it served as a space for the coming together of women for communal activity. This varied from a sewing class to a simple afternoon cup of tea, as contemporary photographs show. The intention was that rather than staying inside her flat, the woman’s presence in the club would form part of a process that would remind her that she was a member of both her own family and the community of Kensal House.

In the evening, the adults’ club took on a different aspect. With the children packed off to their club, it became a venue where, as one of the GLCC’s pamphlets put it, “the men can come down with their wives for a pleasant social hour or two after the day’s work is done.” As well as providing a venue for socializing among neighbors (and between couples), the club was also equipped with tools for making and repairing furniture, and mending shoes. Such facilities would assist the tenants in making ends meet, but they were also intended, given the emphasis on regenerating the family which pervaded Kensal House, to help foster a sense of pride in homemaking among both the male and female tenants. The fact that this also tended to reinforce gender roles – men made furniture (and also worked on the allotments outside) while women sewed – reflected the New Feminism of Denby.

The discussion so far has focused on specific architectural spaces, yet it was not solely the reconfiguration of space at Kensal House that was intended to transform its inhabitants. Management practices played an equally significant role in the promotion of certain types of behavior among the tenants.

When Kensal House was completed in late 1936, the GLCC appointed Denby as its Housing Director in order “to remain in touch with the estate and keep it on experimental lines.” This allowed her to instigate the particular system of management that would further enable the tenants to feel pride in and responsibility for their new homes. As she said, “the spirit of the estate is that the people run it themselves.”

Running the estate themselves began with the space outside the tenants’ flats. Each family belonged to a staircase committee which was responsible for looking after the communal areas around their flats. From this committee two representatives were selected to serve on what was the most innovative feature of Kensal House, its tenants’ committee. This dealt with the everyday management of the estate. Denby acknowledged that in practice this “... was more difficult than it sounds” but stressed “[that] everyone seems quite happy as things are working out.”
Conclusion: citizen and housewife

On this small site in West London, the extraordinary domestic landscape of Kensal House was thus formed. From its inhabitation in the final months of 1936 and throughout the war years, the modern spaces and democratic management practices had a significant impact on its residents. For most, this was felt in the improved material conditions and in the sense of community created by the estate’s form. At this level, Kensal House certainly fulfilled Fry’s boast that it was no ordinary block of working-class flats. But, as I have outlined, the desire to improve the material and social conditions of everyday life was not an end in itself. Rather, Denby and Fry (and their other collaborators) intended that through this combination of changes in space and living practices, new types of people could be produced. Kensal House would transform working-class folk into modern citizens who could now play their full role in the progression of society.

In the context of this desire, the tenants’ committee took on a particular significance. The skills acquired in committee work – discussion, argument, and the achievement of consensus – were intended to prepare Kensal House’s inhabitants for participation in democratic processes outside it, while the very notion that the tenants should run the estate was intended to inculcate a sense of responsibility for a wider community. For one tenant in particular, the didactic setting and discourses of Kensal House achieved their full transforming power.

Among the members of the tenants’ committee was Mrs Elsie Winborn. Her occupancy of Kensal House, it seems clear, liberated her from time-consuming housework and enabled her to participate in a small exercise in democracy within the walls of the estate. Far more significantly, and radically, this training in civic debate then allowed her to step over the threshold and into the public realm of the UFAC. Thus, Elsie Winborn became “a citizen as well as a housewife.”

Notes
5 The CAI had pioneered such activity. Its 1936–1937 investigation into the furnishing of the working-class home included monitoring of working-class opinion. See Public Record Office for England & Wales (PRO) BT57/a191/35 for documentation of such practices.
6 It should be noted here that no evidence survives in the UFAC papers that provides direct evidence of why members were selected.

8 PRO BT64/1825, minutes of the Advisory Committee on Utility Furniture, 7th Meeting, 18 September 1942.


14 Mrs Winborn remains something of an enigma. Documents show she lived at 4 Kensal House with her husband and four children but little other information has been uncovered to date. See list of Kensal House tenants in documents relating to Kensal House, collection of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Local Studies Library, MSS Box, 21449–21456.


18 I say Anglo-Saxon since the doyenne of Scientific Management in the home, Christine Frederick, took a similar view of the benefits of the rationalization of the dwelling. In her book *Scientific Management in the Home*, she observed, “Women have wrongly permitted homemaking to be both a vocation and an avocation” (original italics). To remedy this confusion of roles, she listed appropriate replacement avocations that included reading more, daily exercise, membership of a local civic club or consumer league, and “giving a short moment each day to abstract thinking, and cultivating a well thought out philosophy of life.” See C. Frederick, *Scientific Management in the Home*, London: George Routledge, 1920, p. 502.


20 A contemporary noted Kensal House’s “…novel social organisation, for the creation of which Miss Elizabeth Denby has been responsible.” Anon., “Visit to Kensal House,” *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 1937, vol. 44, p. 924.


23 The Congress lasted two days. The other strands were “Manufacturing,” “Agriculture and Distribution,” “Education and Training,” “Distribution and Development.” There were also visits and keynote speeches.

24 Sixth International Congress for Scientific Management, *Proceedings*

25 See ibid. and Sixth International Congress for Scientific Management, *Papers*. 

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New spaces of domesticity in 1930s London
The other sessions were: “Food Planning in the Home to ensure Satisfactory Nutrition with a Minimum Expenditure of Time, Money and Labour”; “Scientific Home Management in Agricultural Areas”; “The Technique of Scientific Management in the Home,” Sixth International Congress for Scientific Management, Proceedings. The other speakers were Dr Ingenieur Herbert Mueller, Leader of the Working Commission for the Advancement of Electrical Organizations, Berlin; Amy Sayle, Chair of the Women’s Public Health Officers Association, GB; Mrs A.J. Wolthers Arnolli, Member of Town Council, Provincial Legislature of Utrecht; Drssa Bice Ferrari of Italy.


For a full discussion of this concept, see my paper, “‘Enriching and enlarging the whole sphere of human activities’: The Work of the Voluntary Sector in Housing Reform in Housing Reform in Inter-War Britain” in C. Lawrence and A-K Mayer, eds, Regenerating England, Science, Medicine and Culture in Inter-War Britain, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000.

Mueller, in Sixth International Congress for Scientific Management, Proceedings, p. 156.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid, p. 16.


Denby speaking in the Kensal House film.

Education for Citizenship, London, 1934, p. 12. The four principles were: a sense of social responsibility; a love of truth and freedom; the power of clear thinking in everyday life, and a knowledge of the broad political and economic facts of the modern world (achieved, perhaps, by listening to the wireless in each flat).

The other club was for the children, and was in the west block.

See Plate 14 of Spring Rice, Working Class Wives, and scenes of club life in the Kensal House film.

The Feathers Club Association had been incorporated in 1935 to run a series of clubs in slum areas “for friendship, occupation and recreation.” The clubs at Kensal House were the first to be built as an integral part of a new estate. Its Annual Report for 1937–1938, p. v, noted “the opportunities offered by them [the Clubs] both for the development of the individual and for corporate service to the community.”


Denby, speaking in the Kensal House film.

Ibid.

The experimental nature of Kensal House was curtailed by the postwar nationalization program which saw the estate transferred to the ownership of the London County Council by 1952.

Chapter 4

The housewife, the builder, and the desire for a polykatoikìa apartment in postwar Athens

Ioanna Theocharopoulou

A tactic is a calculated action . . . that makes use of the cracks . . . in the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It is a guileful ruse.


A family story

When I was a child I often heard a story of how one day, while my grandfather was away, my mother and grandmother used white paint to cover the ceiling decorations in their neoclassical house in Crete. From the way my mother recounted the story, I always felt that the whitening act was a great thrill for the female side of the family, something that gave them a sense of achievement and satisfaction. They had cunningly managed to make the changes they wanted and caught my grandfather by surprise, utilizing their female ponirìa (craftiness, guile). This seemed like a defiant, emancipatory act, but at
the same time it was an act of erasure that left me with a sense of unease every time I heard it. Why white paint, the “unspoken obsession” of modern architecture? Were these women obeying Le Corbusier’s “Law of Ripolin” that suggested that “inner cleanliness” can come only after whitewashing one’s walls? Were they trying to turn their well-to-do, architect-designed house into a humble dwelling from an Aegean village? It is more as if whitening the ceiling fused a traditional model of cleanliness with a new idea in the air, that of modernity. Indeed, the crucial next step in my family narrative involved their moving into an urban *polykatoikia* apartment in Athens, a housing type that exemplified this fusion, as I will show below.

This story raises important questions. Why should the tropes of erasure and modernity be linked to housewives in the postwar era? What can we learn about urbanization by paying attention to the domestic environment? And how can we gain a more complex understanding of domestic space as a central aspect of modernity? In this chapter I want to extricate my sense of unease about my own family’s liberatory act by connecting themes of modern architecture, Greek modernity and tradition, with questions of gender.

**The postwar *polykatoikia*: an other modernity**

In the years following the end of the World War II and the Civil War (1946–1949) Athens experienced a remarkable economic growth, one of the highest in Europe at the time. Largely through the wave of migration from the countryside, the city’s population doubled from 1,378,586 inhabitants in 1951 to 2,530,207 in 1971. Most of these new Athenians moved into what, from above, may seem like endless units of white housing blocks (Figure 4.1). Collectively known as the *polykatoikia* – from “poly” (many) + “katoikìa” – this modern word originates from the ancient root *oïkos*, *oikìa* meaning “dwelling” or “household.” Squeezed out of tourist postcards depicting classical sites and monuments, it is these cubic white buildings that make contemporary Athens.

The massive influx of population from rural areas into the city was due to both political and economic reasons. The country was still divided after the end of the Civil War and there was huge material devastation, especially in terms of housing in the countryside. Consequently, there was a much better chance of finding work in the city rather than in the impoverished countryside. In addition, due to the climate of the Cold War and the fear of the communist threat by the postwar right-wing governments, those who had left-wing associations were not allowed to work in the public sector. Many of them ended up working in the construction industry, either as workmen or as heads of small construction teams. Working on the *polykatoikia* provided a living for those who had “suspect” backgrounds and who needed anonymity.4

In a formal sense, the postwar *polykatoikia* certainly looks modern (Figure 4.2). White unadorned façades, rectangular outlines, reinforced con-
crete skeletons, wide openings, flat roofs, often with pilotis for car parking, certainly suggest modernist principles. Yet for the most part, this is modern architecture without architects. Post-World War II Athens is a particularly striking example of a city primarily composed of so-called informal, indeed often illegal building. About 95 percent of all buildings in Athens today were constructed at a very rapid pace in the first postwar decades by small-scale builder-entrepreneurs (for the lower middle classes) and engineer-developers (for the middle classes). Yet it is architects who are usually blamed for this largely unplanned and hastily put-together urban housing, even though they were the ones who least participated in it. In disdain and self-defense, the architects were often its most vociferous critics. As one group insisted in 1976: “the lack of planning, the hysteria of profit, the hydrocephalic centralization are the main reasons for the terrible situation of Athens today.”

Yet cities are only marginally the result of visions and interventions by professional architects and planners. Every major city has large sections that are informally produced, and these sections rarely appear in architectural histories. They suggest an “other” urban and architectural history, one that has so far remained marginalized from the central concerns of the discipline. To some extent, this urban “other” relates to the interest of modern architects...
of this era who were inspired by Greek vernacular architecture, particularly by the white Aegean village, culminating in Bernard Rudofsky’s influential MoMA exhibition and catalog of 1964, Architecture Without Architects. Rudofsky presumed that rural vernacular dwellings, intimately connected to nature, could provide a critical counter-model to professionalized architecture, in a romantic ideal of village (not city) vernacular. In paradoxical contrast, cities such as Athens seemed sprawling and chaotic, without any virtues. Did the techniques of production not work when transported from the village to the city, or is it that no conceptual tools have as yet been developed to address this urban counterpart? Broadening the notion of the vernacular to include urban domestic development, likewise mostly built without architects, may help to produce a more complex history of the postwar city.

This chapter focuses on two agents or sets of actors for this urbanization – housewives and builders – in order to think about gender and class, and to use them as conceptual tools for analysis. Both groups desired the polykatoikia, although for quite different reasons. Just as women and the not-so-educated small builder-developers (ergolávoi) played a marginal role in Greek intellectual life, so the polykatoikia has been a neglected aspect of Greek architectural history. I hope to give central status to what has so far been seen as peripheral, in part simply because the peripheral status of the key players in the polykatoikia story seems to say something important about postwar Greece. Although architects and historians have voiced a profound sense of failure with regard to the polykatoikia, I want to argue for its positive aspects. For one, Athens is unique in that the majority of its housing is of a
relatively decent standard; it is certainly far better than the shanty-towns that
surround cities elsewhere in developing countries. Moreover, because of the
ways in which it was produced – through private initiative as explained below –
this housing actually facilitated an increase in wealth and an improvement in
the standard of living for the vast majority of the population, not just the middle
classes. Lastly, because the architecture represented a sense of progress and
optimism, it signified modern life.

Historically, it is important to bear in mind the tradition of modern
architecture that emerged during the 1930s in Greece. According to Dimitris
Philippidis:

There was a sudden explosion of the Modern Movement [in Greek]
arquitellcture around 1930 [and] even though Greek architects were
not included in the 1932 “International Style” exhibition at MoMA,
they staged their own exhibition the next year, proudly displaying
their modern buildings to the visitors attending the 4th International
Conference of Modern Architecture (C.I.A.M.) in Athens.7

Toward the end of this decade the term “polykatoikia” began to be used more
widely to describe urban apartment buildings. A basic formula had also taken
shape: reinforced concrete construction for slabs, large openings for doors and
windows, built-in wooden shutters and narrow balconies on façades.
However, the majority of polykatoikia buildings during this interwar period
belonged to middle or upper middle-class families who had commissioned
them directly from architects.

The polykatoikia apartment changed in the years just after World
War II and the end of the Greek Civil War. Almost anyone could then own an
apartment, although there were still identifiable differences between different
social levels of inhabitants. Three broad categories emerged that had as much
to do with social status as with location: the low-income polykatoikia in the
neighborhoods immediately outside the center and in the peripheries of
the city, the middle-class polykatoikia in the central neighborhoods of the city,
and the luxury polykatoikia in select upper-class neighborhoods primarily in the
center of the city.8 They are remarkably similar in plan, if not in scale. As a rule,
the ground floor (at street level) contained small commercial spaces. Above
that, the residential apartments had two distinct zones: the public areas
looking into the street, while the private areas (including service areas) looked
into light-wells at the back, which ranged in size according to the quality of con-
struction. Each apartment contained a small hallway area (hòl), a reception
rooms (living room or salòni), dining room, kitchen, two or three bedrooms,
one or two bathrooms, and a small maid’s room – and every middle-class
family seemed to have a maid during that period.9
The housewife

Housewives, eager to modernize their domestic environments, were glad to move into the sparkling new polykatoikia apartments which offered significant transformations in women’s everyday lives. Even an inexpensive new apartment had better amenities than a nineteenth-century middle-class urban house – which at that time typically lacked proper central heating, good cooking facilities, and an internal WC. The thousands who flooded into Athens from the provinces, used to even fewer amenities, were almost desperate for such improvement. Who wouldn’t choose to live in a polykatoikia apartment with modern comforts such as heating, hot water, bathrooms, and modern appliances as well? The “Publishers’ Lottery” proclaims that the lucky winner of the “Electric House of 1961” (Figure 4.3) would get “a first floor apartment on Patission Avenue #119, in a polykatoikia with 5 rooms, hallway, bath, maid’s room . . . and complete electric appliances – refrigerator, kitchen, washing machine, dryer, ironer, dishwasher, mixer, electric vacuum cleaner, air conditioner and heating.”

In Greece, as elsewhere in the southern Mediterranean, women were traditionally associated with the house. Housekeeping is exclusively women’s work. The Greek word is “noikokyriò,” from oïkos + kyrios, roughly meaning mastering or ordering the interior of the house, and the woman is the noikokyrà, the house-mistress, a term of distinction. At the same time the noikokyriò always denotes a shared power, held equally by both husband and wife, each having separate responsibilities. In most parts of Greece,
women were the ones who inherited houses as part of their dowry. The institution was formally abandoned only in 1983. In fact, not owning a house could mean that a woman would not be able to find a husband. As anthropologist Jill Dubisch suggests, “even when she does not actually own her dwelling, a woman is viewed in terms of the house and the house is viewed in relation to the woman. It is still a high compliment to say of a woman (but not of a man) that she is tou spitiou, or ‘of the house’, that is, that her time and attention are devoted to the house and family and their care.”12 Updating this tradition, one popular 1959 film likens a desirable sexy blonde to a polykatoikìa (Figure 4.4).

The comic actor Costas Chatzichristos delivers the following lines with gestures full of sexual innuendoes: “I want a woman to be like a polykatoikia. To have many floors. To be substantial. In length, height and width. With verandas, attics, basements . . . I want to look at her and my whole field of vision to be full of . . . floors!”13

To understand the house as a woman’s domain one also has to understand that ”noikokyriò” is, perhaps above all else, a financial concept. It stands for the household economy that was traditionally identified with women. Part of the art of the noikokyriò as women’s knowledge is to be able to make do with available resources, no matter how minimal, and in addition to put money aside. Ethnographers insist that “women are indispensable to the economic organization of the noikokyriò, [their] social prestige, like that of their husbands, rests on the public recognition of the household’s success.”14 Women put money aside not only for the various needs of the family, but also specifically for their daughters’ dowry – which often became an apartment in

4.4 Laos kai Kolonaki (The People and Kolonaki), Yannis Dalianidis, 1959. Actor Costas Chatzichristos talks about a desirable blonde, comparing her to a polykatoikìa
an Athenian polykatoikia housing block. In this sense, they played a significant role not only in imagining the ideal of modern life in a polykatoikia apartment, but also in executing it. The striking fact that there were no shanty-towns around Athens at this time, despite the huge inflow of internal migrants, can be partly attributed to the transfer of rural wealth into the city through the dowry system.

A dowry included providing the material to “dress” and to display the interior. Women prepared the fabrics and furnishings of the traditional as well as the postwar dwelling in both rural and urban settings. The idea of display remained central, although postwar urban women were expected to provide modern consumer goods for the home, such as European furniture and appliances, which they could purchase in special stores selling “dowry items.” Whereas the interior once demonstrated a woman’s skills as a producer of home goods, it now showed her skills as consumer. Whereas it once showed her knowledge of domestic traditions, the postwar polykatoikia displayed her modernity and cosmopolitanism. Unlike the traditional housewife in a rural house, the upper-class inhabitant of an Athenian polykatoikia apartment wore fashionable clothes, and the furniture and objects that surrounded her displayed both her independence and knowledge of the world (Figures 4.5 and 4.6). Here, she casually leans against a copy of Vogue magazine, while the

4.5
Aggeliki Chatzimihali, interior sketches of a Skyros house, c. 1949
Yet if we pause to look more closely at these two images, we discover that, despite all their obvious differences, they are not so dissimilar after all. The drawing of a 1940s’ rural interior and the photograph of a wealthy Athenian from the 1970s, both portray a woman surrounded by the objects that identify her with her surroundings. Her traditional role of dressing the house has remained much the same. Whereas the sketches show us spaces with handmade furniture and objects, clothes woven on the loom, and walls with niches where things are put away, the photographs show us a spare, hybrid interior, but one that is still arranged, if not produced, by her. The woman remains at the center of the space, complementing and intimately tied to the domestic setting.

The fact that being modern also meant being cosmopolitan and “European” is very evident in the language used by women’s magazines of the period, such as Ellinida (Hellenic Woman), Gynaika kai spiti (Woman and Home) and Moderno Spiti (Modern Home). These magazines lauded modernity as the utmost virtue in both a woman and home: “house, dress and behavior are by now identified with each other, they compose a triangle . . .”Articles routinely taught women how to set up their apartment, how to dress, and how to follow certain European habits in daily life, such as “how to serve afternoon tea.” At times, the magazines showed women how to reconcile past and present, modern and traditional, Greek and foreign. For instance, contemporary Scandinavian or reproduction Louis XIV furniture comfortably coexisted with objects from “traditional Greek art” such as carved wooden chests, and hand-painted ceramic dishes, often creating intriguing visual oppositions.
Such contradictions in the interior point to larger tensions in issues of identity at that time. To be cosmopolitan meant being European-Western cosmopolitan. This helped to resolve the lingering tension in Greek identity between “East” and “West,” where “East” and its associations with the long occupation by the Ottoman Empire was definitely less desirable than “West.” The fact that there was pressure on Greece to associate itself with the “West” defined as anti-communist, added to this mix. The Cold War was a further impetus to relinquish memories of the Ottoman past and to identify with Europe, America, and the “free world.” Housewives wanted to move into new “modern” apartments, in part because it was a step closer to what they saw as becoming “European.” Remnants of the culture of the East in traditional decoration and everyday life seemed somehow inferior to the culture of the West, to which Greece aspired to belong. Yet these remnants didn’t go away that easily; instead, they stubbornly appeared in many aspects of everyday life.

Reminiscing about the early postwar decades, one writer recently declared:

Whatever bothered us in the decoration of the traditional house interior was “eastern”; the small embroideries . . . the Persian carpet reproductions. We would eat dolma, bean soups and fried meatballs but when we had guests for dinner we offered cold risotto milanese, a reminder that our heart belongs to Milan. And it was in truth a heart divided in two: one half belonged to our everyday lives and the other to what we hoped would change in our lives so as to civilize us, to make us more modern, more chic [. . .].

The builders
While the lower middle- and middle-class polykatoikia was an architectural type, perhaps its most distinguishing characteristic was as a financial arrangement. Everyone in Greece knows that the postwar polykatoikia was the result of an unusual process called “part-exchange” (antiparochi). A builder did not have to buy land to start construction, nor did he have to have much capital in advance. Instead, he would agree with an owner of land to use his or her plot, and to provide him or her with one or several apartments in the new polykatoikia in return. The builder would also pre-sell the rest of the apartments to gather enough capital to start construction. This financing method depended on small-scale ownership, a distinctive characteristic of both rural and urban Greece.

The builders of the average lower-income polykatoikia came from a variety of backgrounds (Figure 4.7). Many had been in construction work as plumbers and electricians. This group remained small-scale entrepreneurs,
as did the more educated businessmen-engineers who were responsible for much upper middle-class polykatoikía. This male role or knowledge has much in common with female knowledge about the interior. It too suggests a “modern” urban adaptation of more traditional patterns of building work, that of the master craftsman and his team. Construction techniques were relatively simple and the builders’ equipment minimal. The new techniques, easily learned, sustained few and slow changes. The work was itinerant, only loosely organized into specialities such as the marble workers (marmarades), the concrete workers (betatzides), the plasterers (sovatzides), the terrazzo makers (mosaikoi), and the floor workers (patomatzides). As had been the case before the war, workers still came from specific regions known for their particular skills such as Epirots for masonry building and Cycladics for work with marble. Their work, while not identical to “traditional” stone building, was certainly an updated version of it. Concrete, which was mixed manually on site and then carried up on ladders in small tin buckets, became the principal building material.

The rapid growth of the postwar city was characterized by these small-scale business operations, which ultimately worked to the benefit of many rather than a few. This gave another positive aspect and social character to Athenian urbanization. Everyone profited: the builders, the owners of older houses that had to be demolished, the new owners who just came into the city from the countryside, and even those same government officials who were on the one hand condemning this phenomenon were usually somehow also implicated in it. Indeed, the whole country benefited from the intense building boom, which was concentrated in cities such as Athens. As Peter Allen notes, “in 1950, Greece ranked 45th in the world with a per capita GNP of $239; by 1979 the figure had risen to over $3,500 and Greece ranked 28th in the world, having surpassed more than a dozen countries that were ahead of it in 1950 . . .”
All the same, the press of the period, especially magazines, cartoons and popular films, shows another side of this building process: the destruction of the nineteenth-century city to make way for the polykatoikia (Figure 4.8). As in my family history, the postwar polykatoikia suggests a modernity that must erase something of the past in order to look to the future. Images of the demolition of older Athenian houses, usually with neoclassical façades, always went hand-in-hand with the polykatoikia construction.

The small-scale builder-entrepreneurs wanted the polykatoikia because they profited from construction, and housewives were happy with the improvements in their everyday lives. Those who opposed the polykatoikia, such as the architects who felt left out of the large construction gains, as well as other members of the educated elite who resented the unregulated changes in the city, felt nostalgia and a sense of loss towards the prewar Athens they knew. The 1965 film Woman Should Fear Man depicts the tension between an upper-level government employee and his wife before their impending move from a small old house to a new polykatoikia apartment. All the surrounding demolition and new construction only intensifies their personal tensions about change. The woman is impatient to move into a polykatoikia, which she also associates with a move up on the social ladder as well, much to the dismay of her partner. Their disagreement causes them to break up, as their old house is duly demolished.

The haphazard ways in which demolition and rebuilding happened has been endlessly criticized for its unruliness and disorganization. The lack of
overall planning led to a city seen as chaotic and poorly planned, while the average *polykatoikia* often had problematic technical dimensions, such as poor seismic and sound design, as well as inadequate thermal and sound insulation. The ways in which it was produced led to architectural historians being reluctant to think of it as architecture. There is no doubt that there are many unsatisfactory aspects about this system, not least because it reinforces the cultural stereotypes of Greece as incapable of organized behavior.

Yet there are other interesting cultural dimensions to this. Contextualizing the *polykatoikia* with other fields of modernization may help us in providing clues. For example, there may be something we could learn from research on the introduction of electricity as a relatively new field in the interwar period. This has revealed the difficulty in accepting notions of scientific training and of professional experts by the large majority of people, and has underlined the necessity of analyzing these kinds of problems as parts of larger cultural phenomena.

In addition, there is another specific cultural trait that ties the housewives and the small builders together. Postwar Athenian *polykatoikia* builders and developers used an important attribute, known in Greek as *ponirià*, meaning “craftiness” or “guile,” which the classicist Jean-Pierre Vernant has described as an “extraordinarily stable [characteristic] throughout Hellenism.” Related to the mythological *metis*, also meaning cunning, craftiness, this term is similar to de Certeau’s notion of a “tactic.” De Certeau discusses the “tactic” as an art of the weak. Similarly, anthropologist Michael Herzfeld analyzes this notion of cunning in the Greek context as a trait traditionally attributed to women, the weak and politically oppressed:

> Ethnographic accounts of rural Greece are indeed full of references to the low cunning characteristic of women. . . . Thus, we immediately see a correlation between the position of women as potentially intelligent and even dangerous subverters of the male-controlled social order, and that of the Greek *rayades* who . . . supplant the authority of the hated Turk with their cheeky subordination.

In a sense, the *polykatoikia* was a dangerous subverter of male-controlled social order, from the scale of the family to that of the city and even the state. Although these are stereotypes of gender and ethnicity, I am trying to deploy them not in the stereotypical way, but so as to develop the conceptual tools we need to understand important aspects of this modernity. Ordinary people used *ponirià* to get things built, and “cheeky subordination” was supposedly a characteristic of both women (as in my family story) and the weak. There were indeed countless ways in which the *polykatoikia* builders and residents
avoided adhering to specific building laws and regulations. So successful were they in finding ways in which to build as they wanted, that no government was able to forestall the polykatoikia’s development, no matter how hard it tried, and none of the 11 postwar masterplans for the city of Athens were ever successfully put into effect.

A popular film comedy of 1959 captures this idea of getting things done through one’s ponirià and connects it to the urban polykatoikia. *O Thisauros tou Makariti* (The Dead Man’s Treasure) directed by Nikos Tziforos,
features two protagonists, an urban housewife and a small builder-developer, Mr Neokosmos (Mr New World) (Figure 4.9). He tries to trick her in order to buy her “worthless” old house and build a *polykatoikia* on the site, even as she tricks him – and other possible tenants – into updating her house, by spreading rumors about a treasure hidden somewhere in the house by her late husband. Thinking the treasure may be located in the kitchen, the developer himself demolishes the old tiled fireplace and kitchen cabinets. She then demands a new white kitchen which she lovingly shines every day. The movie culminates with the discovery of a hidden note that entitles her to a small fortune and even the possibility of a romantic affair with the developer. Like a modern-day Circe, this housewife succeeded through her *ponirià*.

**Conclusion**

The *polykatoikia* was a popular phenomenon. It enabled the transition from the country to the city in which there was work, distribution of wealth, and continuity of trade and activity. In the process, some of the building traditions famously discussed and even romanticized by Bernard Rudofsky were transferred to the city, and this in part explains the success and easy adaptation of the builders. Not unlike the rural vernacular, we cannot do justice to the postwar *polykatoikia* if we study it solely as an architectural object. Rather, we have to see these buildings in terms of the processes in which they were constructed and inhabited, as well as to recognize the successful ways in which their simple repeatable structure accommodated social diversity and the enormous pressures of rapid growth. To do this, we need a more inclusive method of study that addresses its social and anthropological dimensions. After all, the construction of identity that went hand-in-hand with postwar reconstruction is an issue that exceeds any single academic discipline. In order to address the *polykatoikia* in a significant way, we need to place it within larger questions of social organization and cultural imagination.

In this way, we may start to understand how the Athenian *polykatoikia* embodied modernity, partly by breaking away from tradition, and partly by continuing it, and in doing so it also framed the modern woman. Beyond that, it also seemed to say something more general about postwar Greece. For instance, the mischievous whitewashing act and the constant demolition, the extremely rapid transformation and yet the continuity of very traditional patterns and, most of all, the sense of optimism and defiance, and at the same time the persistence of a sense of defeat and disappointment. While not reconciling these factors, the *polykatoikia* undermined the usual binaries in a city, such as tradition/innovation, architect/builder, structure/interior, male/female, and helps us to cast new light on the ongoing questions of what is “modern architecture” and what is a “modern city.”
Ioanna Theocaropoulou

Notes
I would like to thank Mr Adamopoulos, Director of the Hellenic Film Archives in Athens, for helping me to find some specific films, my advisors, Gwendolyn Wright, Karen Van Dyck, and Kenneth Frampton, as well as historian Yorgos Tzirtzilakis for their ongoing support.


2 The whole passage about whitewashing and inner cleanliness reads: “Imagine the results of the Law of Ripolin. Every citizen is required to replace his hangings, his damasks, his wallpapers, his stencils, with a plain coat of white ripolin. His home is made clean. There are no more dirty, dark corners. Everything is shown as it is. Then comes inner cleanliness, for the course adopted leads to refusal to allow anything at all which is not correct, authorized, intended, desired, thought-out: no action before thought. When you are surrounded with shadows and dark corners you are at home only as far as the hazy edges of the darkness your eyes cannot penetrate. You are not master in your own house. Once you have put ripolin on your walls you will be master of yourself. And you want to be precise, to be accurate, to think clearly. You will rearrange your house . . .” Le Corbusier, The Decorative Art of Today, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987 (original title: L’art décoratif d’aujourd’hui, 1925), p. 188.


4 This point was made by architect Dimitris Antonakakis (b. 1933), in an interview with the author, in Athens, November 2003.


6 Anthropologist Peter S. Allen, the first scholar to find some positive aspects in Athenian postwar urbanization, writes: “A United Nations study of 23 countries in these three continents (Asia, Africa and Latin Americal shows 35 percent of the total urban population in squatter settlements and provides a list of 40 cities averaging well over 30 percent of their populations in shanty towns, noting that the highest percentages are found in India, Brazil and in Turkey. A recent newspaper report notes that ‘the average Turkish city dweller lives in a ‘gecekondu,’ and ‘about 60 percent of the inhabitants of Ankara and Istanbul are gecekondu dwellers’. ‘ Positive aspects of Greek urbanization: The case of Athens by 1980,” Ekistics, vol. 53, no. 318/319, 1986, p. 188.


9 Historian Rena Brisimi-Maraki notes that the most “wanted” advertisements in the years between 1955 and 1963 were for maids (ypirètries), the average age of whom was 12–15 years. From Enas Aionas Ellada (One Century Greece) pp. 157–158, p. 182.

10 In the 1961 census, 86.5 percent of rural dwellings had no electricity in Greece, 91.9 percent had no running water and 98.9 percent no WC inside the house. In contrast, 10.5 percent of urban dwellings had no electricity, 29 percent no running water and (a staggering) 70.4 percent had no WC in the house. From “Katoikia kai Astiko Perivalon: Provlimata kai
Epidiwxeis” (Dwelling and Urban Environment) by Athanasios Aravantinos, *Sygxroni Technologia Journal* (Contemporary Technology), Special Issue, Athens, 1975, p. 33.


13 *Laos kai Kolonaki* (The People and Kolonaki) directed by Yiannis Dalianidis, 1959. The title of the film implies the social contrast between the “people” (laós) and the upper classes who live in Kolonaki, a wealthy central area of Athens.


15 Anthropologist Lucy Rushton has written about this: “Greek women’s handiwork is no mere pastime. It is bound closely to the traditional sense of woman’s role and destiny. A young girl learns to sew so that she will be marriageable. These skills symbolize, obscurely, all that she must be . . . In viewing [the dowry] other women typically express admiration for the bride’s “golden hands” and there is a strong sense that it is more than her skill that is being displayed. She has laid out her virtue before them.” Lucy Rushton, “Cultural ABCs: Women,” *GREECE, Insight Guides*, Karen Van Dyck, ed., New York: APA Publications, 1991, p. 308.

16 “Anatólia” was the name of a local carpet manufacturer. This article is from *Architektoniki kai diakosmisi*, (Architecture and Decoration Journal), vol. 84, no. 4, 1971.

17 The interior sketches, made c. 1949 by Aggeliki Chatzimihali, are from her *La maison Grèque*, Athens: Collection de “L’Hellenisme Contemporaine,” 1949. Chatzimihali (1895–1965) was an enthusiastic supporter of popular art. She spent most of her life documenting in drawings and writing about everyday life, the art and the customs of the Greek countryside. She wrote a great deal about women’s decorative arts such as embroidery and weaving, she was herself a significant collector, and she founded schools for young women in Athens to learn these arts. Her house – designed by her friend, the architect Aristotelis Zahos (1924–1931), is now a museum of popular arts.

18 In “Modern,” a Definition’ by Vassilis Kazantzis, “*Moderno Spiti,*” no. 1, August–September 1964, p. 4.

19 Indeed, Prime Minister Constantinos Karamanlis signed the official treaty of Greece’s entry to the European Union in Athens, July 1961.


21 There is a whole range of terminology associated with the *polykatoïkia* of the postwar period. Phrases such as “*polykatoïkia eisodimatos*” (polykatikia for income), “*dyari,*” “*triari,*” “*tessari*” (describing an apartment according to the number of rooms, such as two-room, three-room, four-room etc.), “*retirè*” (the stepped-back top-floor apartments) and “*garson-iéra*” (small bachelor pad). There were also terms that related to the builders and the whole mechanism of building, such as “*oikopedofagos*” (land-eater), “*oikopedemborio*” (land-trading) and “*authaireto*” (illegal, unauthorized building).

22 Originally voted in 1932, the *antiparochì* system really started to be implemented and widely deployed during the postwar period.

For more on this point, see S. Antonopoulou, as above.

Historian Dimitris Philippidis has introduced the term “para-urbanism” (parapoleodormia) to describe this kind of urban growth that happened in parallel but not necessarily totally distinctly or in opposition to official urbanism. In fact he shows how it often worked symbiotically with it, each satisfying specific and complementary interests. “Parapoleodormia,” in Gia tin Elliniki Poli. Metapolemiki Poreia kai Mellontikes Proooptikes (The Greek City. Postwar Paths and Future Perspectives) Athens: Themelio, 1990, especially p. 192.

These figures are from P. Allen, “Positive aspects of Greek urbanization: The case of Athens by 1980,” p. 190.

Original title: I de gyni na fovatai ton andra, directed by Yorgos Tzavelas, 1965.

Apart from two short sections in Dimitris Philippidis’ Neoelliniki Architektoniki (Neohellenic Architecture), Athens: Melissa, 1984, pp. 310–315 and 382–388, and another short section in his Moderna Architektoniki stin Ellada (Modern Architecture in Greece), Athens: Melissa 2001, pp. 101–112, there is very little in Greek architectural historiography explicitly about the postwar polyktokia as an architectural phenomenon, even though there is material by sociologists, economists, and planners. There are some important exceptions to this: Dimitris Philippidis’ editorial in Architektonika Themata Journal (Architecture in Greece) n. 12, 1978, especially Anastasia Tzakou’s article “I exelixi tis polyktokiaias stin Athina meta ton polemo” (The development of the polyktokia in Athens after the war); Dimitris and Suzanna Antonakakis’ “I metapolemiki polyktokia ws geneiteira tou dimosiou xworou – Mia prwti pros-eggisi” (The postwar polyktokia as the origin of public space – an initial approach), in I Athina ston 20 o Aìwna, I Athina opws (den) fainetai, 1940–1985 (Athens in the 20th Century, Athens As it is (Not) Seen 1940–1985), Athens: Ministry of Culture and Association of Architects, 1985; and lastly, Theano Fotiou’s “Architectonika protypa stin sygkrion Athina. I periptwsi tis astikis polyktokiaias, I morphologia tis polis” (Architectural prototypes in contemporary Athens. The case of the urban polyktokia), in I Neoelliniki Poli (The Neohellenic City), Guy Bourgel, ed., Athens: Exandas Press, 1989. In addition, Dimitris Philippidis’ Gia tin Elliniki Poli. Metapolemiki Poreia kai Mellontikes Proooptikes (The Greek City. Postwar Paths and Future Perspectives), Athens: Themelio, 1990, and Georgios-Stylianos N. Prevelakis’ Epistrophi stin Athina (Return to Athens), Athens: Estia Press 2001, provide much valuable research, especially vis-à-vis the question of the relationship of the state to this urbanism. More recently, architects and scholars have written about the contemporary legacy of the polyktokia:


Michael Herzfeld, “The Category of ‘Female’ in Greece”, in Gender and Power in Rural Greece, p. 230. The term “rayas” (pl. rayades) was used for the subject populations of the Ottoman Empire that had to pay special taxes and duties and had limited rights and freedoms.
Chapter 5

Promoting Catholic family values and modern domesticity in postwar Belgium

Fredie Floré

The Christian Workers’ Movement: advocate of modernity?

The Christelijke Arbeidersbeweging (Christian Workers’ Movement) was one of the most influential actors in the postwar debate on “good homes” in Belgium. Compared to the contemporary efforts made by the national government and the cultural avant-garde to improve the nation’s housing culture, it had developed a remarkably well-organized and effective programme of “taste education.” In the postwar years the Christian Workers’ Movement was coordinated by a national bureau, but it consisted of a cluster of relatively autonomous sub-organizations. On the one hand, it included a series of educational and apostolic branches with separate organizations for men, women, male and female youngsters in each major language community – Flanders and Wallonia. On the other hand, there was a series of socioeconomic branches, including the health insurance, the trade union, and the cooperatives, each organized on a national level.

The Christian Workers’ Movement’s postwar promotion for “better” housing was mainly the work of its educational and apostolic branches. The ideological framework for the propaganda was set out by the national bureau, but in the communication to the working class the two
women’s organizations played a leading role: the Flemish Kristelijke Arbeidersvrouwen­gilden (Christian Workers’ Women’s Guilds) and the francophone Ligues Ouvrières Féminines Chrétiennes (Christian Workers’ Women’s Guilds). On several occasions, these working-class women collaborated with their male counterparts: the Flemish Katholieke Werklieden­bonden (Catholic Workmen’s Associations), and the francophone Equipes Populaires (People’s Teams). Mainly through housing exhibitions, household courses, and series of articles in their monthly magazines, these organizations have noticeably remodelled the interior of many working-class homes (Figure 5.1).

This chapter focuses on the housing ideals mediated by the Christian Workers’ Movement between 1945 and the early 1950s, a period in which its housing education was more intense than ever. It shows how the “model homes” advocated by this movement were the product of a tense relationship between the postwar Christian ideology and the then rapidly modernizing society. Furthermore, it illustrates how the movement carefully incorporated its promotion of “modern” living in an overall plea for the primacy of the nuclear family.

Compared with other European countries, the history of the Christian Workers’ Movement in Belgium is quite unique. Whereas workers’ movements abroad were mainly linked to a socialist ideology, this was not the case in Belgium. The Belgian Christian Workers’ Movement originated around 1900 and gradually developed to become – in the second half of the 1950s – the biggest workers’ movement of the nation, stronger than its socialist opponent. The Flemish Christian Workers’ Women’s Guilds, for example, grew
rapidly from about 92,000 members in 1933 up to about 210,000 in 1950. This means that at the beginning of the 1950s, depending on the district, they were represented in 30–55 percent of working-class families in Flanders. The Christian Workers’ Women’s Guilds in the francophone and more socialist-oriented part of Belgium were not very large, but their membership also increased rapidly from about 89,000 in 1933 to a peak of about 160,000 in 1950. The male branches of the Christian Workers’ Movement were only established in the 1940s. Compared with their female counterparts they were rather small, but in the first decennium after the war their membership also knew a period of intense growth. Although the apostolic and educational activities of the Christian Workers’ Movement were divided over the two language communities, the Flemish and francophone Christian Workmen and Workers’ Women maintained regular contact through an informal consultative body. As far as “good housing” was concerned, they even undertook similar actions. However, the educational campaign was far more intense in Flanders than in Wallonia, where the apostolic character of the movement in particular was developed. For this reason, this chapter mainly focuses on Flanders.

The Christian Workers’ Movement in general advocated the emancipation of the working class. Its activities were meant to improve the quality of life of the Belgian workers and their families who were considered morally and materially degenerated by the war, by the negative side-effects of the capitalist system – such as the extreme pursuit of profit, regardless of the working conditions – and by the “bad” influence of the socialist and communist workers’ organizations. After World War II, this central goal was interpreted according to the “Christian personalism,” a term which in the first place refers to the contemporary social doctrine of the Church. Inspired by this direction of thought, the Christian Workers’ Movement based its actions on the conviction that each human individual has a personal and divine destiny, which can only be approached by developing oneself on a material and mental level. “Nothing in this world can prevent a person to reach this goal, which is the unification of the creature with his creator,” the national bureau of the movement stated. Therefore, each human was assigned a set of inalienable rights: the right to live, to have an undamaged body and to dispose of the necessary means to live: work, property, union, truth, moral, and religious practice. The emphasis laid on the personal development of each Christian did not relieve the individual from his social duties, however. According to the Christian personalism, a human could only truly develop himself within the context of several communities, of which the most important ones were family, work, people, nation, and church.

Christian personalism clearly oriented the Christian Workers’ Movement’s postwar view on culture, education, and leisure time. "The ‘moral and cultural’ elevation of the workers did not at all mean the appropriation of
the dominant cultural model based on intellectual training, but rather the development of one’s own personality as a human, the exploration of all human qualities,” the historian Patrick Pasture explains. But simultaneously he remarks: “In practice however this personalist ideology was mixed with on the one hand bourgeois ideals and on the other an explicitly negative attitude towards the expressions of modern society (anti-modernism).” Pasture refers to the Christian Workers’ Movement’s postwar view of child education which remained traditional until the second half of the 1960s and to its conservative attitude towards certain forms of modern leisure – dancing, cinema, etc. This chapter will show that the Christian Workers’ Movement’s ambiguous position towards “modernity” also reveals itself in its promotion of “good homes.” For example, the movement advocated the creation of a “contemporary” way of life, but its urban and architectural housing model was traditional and basically reflected the bourgeois ideal of living in the countryside. The recommended interior arrangements of the house were more progressive, but they were clearly inspired by the movement’s aversion to certain aspects of modern society. This was already apparent in the late 1930s when the Flemish Workers’ Women initiated their plea for a “better” popular housing culture. In 1939, they organized their first itinerary housing exhibition called Modern Gezinsleven. Wij Bouwen een Nieuwen Thuis (Modern Family Life. We are Building a New Home). The introductory part of the presentation focused on the difficulty of building a home in “our time that is a threat to the development, the goals, the love and the happiness of family lives.” The “threatening” forces included the increasing importance of outdoor mass-entertainment, promiscuity, etc. By promoting the domestic interior as a contemporary and challenging family project, the Flemish Christian Workers’ Women hoped to lance a strong alternative for the “negative” temptations of modern society. Although the content of the discourse slightly changes after the war, similar tensions continued to characterize the “good housing” education of the Christian Workers’ Movement.

Reconstructing the traditional single-family house

In accordance with the personalist ideology, the Christian Workers’ Movement believed that every person and every family was entitled to a suitable and healthy dwelling. In the immediate postwar years both the male and female associations therefore closely followed up the formation of the national housing and reconstruction policy. As was the case since the beginning of social housing in Belgium in the early 1920s, the housing debate was characterized by the contrasting visions of the Catholic and Socialist parties in government. The first wanted to stimulate private ownership and the erection of single-family houses, preferably on separate lots. This resulted in the first postwar housing subsidy act – the De Taeye Act – which was passed on
May 29, 1948. The Socialist party strongly believed in collective housing and proposed the Brunfaut Subsidy Act, which – with severely reduced contents – was passed on April 15, 1949. As the Brunfaut Act also lacked the necessary enforcement orders, it was mainly the De Taeye Act that, from the 1950s onwards, was instrumental in urban development in Belgium. Without the guidance of a structured urban program, it became the main reason for the nation’s well-known excessive sprawl: a scattered scene of ribbon development and detached houses.

The Christian Workers’ Movement, of course, supported the Catholic vision on postwar housing. In 1946, the national bureau described the private ownership of a house as an important “tool” for the emancipation of the working class. It referred to the 1941 Whitsun message of Pope Pius XII which stated: “Among all the goods which can be the subject of private ownership, none so well corresponds with nature, as the grounds, the property, that is inhabited by the family.” The Christian Workers’ Movement often referred to this quotation and saw it as an encouragement to promote the private ownership of a house among its members. Furthermore, it stated that the acquisition of a dwelling would significantly improve the morality of its owners: it would inspire them with a sense of dignity, social responsibility, and economic safety, and would encourage them to upgrade their possessions for future generations.

In the postwar years, the Christian Workers’ Movement combined its promotion of the private ownership of a house with thorough research of the contemporary housing problems. For example, already in 1945–1946 the national bureau initiated an extensive study of “popular housing in Belgium.” The Christian Workers’ Movement thus built up an important expert view which strengthened its political influence and helped several members to achieve strategic positions in the national housing debate. In 1951, for instance, Raf Hulpiau, head of the study service of the national bureau, was appointed president of the administrative council of the national housing body Nationale Maatschappij voor Goedkope Woningen en Woonvertrekken (National Society for Cheap Houses and Rooms). In the same year he was also accepted as a member of several advisory committees and institutions such as the Hoge Raad voor Volkshuisvesting en Volkswoningen (High Council of Public Housing and Public Dwellings) and the Nationaal Instituut tot Bevordering van de Huisvesting (National Institute for Housing Promotion).

The Catholic Workmen and the Christian Workers’ Women refined and communicated the general housing programme, set out by the national bureau, to its members. The ideal home depicted in their periodicals was a single-family house with a saddle roof in green surroundings – a somewhat modest version of the middle-class suburban villa. The more “realistic” or affordable models presented in these magazines show a comfortable
terrace brick house with an entrance at street level and a back garden. To achieve this “dream house,” the associations repeatedly informed their members on the new housing policy and the financial support of the government. From 1947, the Flemish Christian Workers’ Women devoted part of their household courses to the introduction of “concepts of the housing problem in general” and “the contemporary developments and possibilities of house-building.” Together with the Catholic Workmen, they even established a special housing service called Hulp in Woningnood (Assistance in Times of Housing Shortage). This service set up local action committees that investigated the contemporary housing quality, discussed the possibilities of new dwelling projects, coordinated the public’s housing wishes, and provided free housing information and advice.

Throughout the postwar years, the Catholic Workmen and the Christian Workers’ Women never thoroughly questioned or criticized the primacy of the traditional single-family house. The discussions regarding the architecture of the home were generally restricted to the suggestion that certain alterations to the internal organization might improve the quality of living. In a “contest” of 1949, for instance, the Flemish Christian Workers’ Women asked their members to select from a series of seven the “best” ground-floor design for a house. The competitors basically had to express their preference for a dwelling either with an “old-fashioned” all-in-one kitchen–living room or with a separate kitchen, either with or without a parlor and with or without a separate washhouse. The majority indicated their preference for the design of a house with a parlor and a washhouse, and with a kitchen separate from the living area. Instead of questioning the “ideal home” chosen by the public, the Christian Workers’ Women merely registered the answers and
comments of its readers. “This is how you imagine a good home” was the title of an article on the results of the contest in the women’s monthly. Apparently, the discussions on the architectural organization of the house were mainly meant to initiate an opinion poll and to make readers aware of the quality of the spaces they inhabited, rather than to encourage them to rebuild their home thoroughly or to construct a new one according to a “good” or “better” example. Most of the movement’s members, of course, did not have the financial means to do so.

The domestic interior as a cautious expression of modernity

The moral and educational plea of the Christian Workers’ Movement for the establishment of “good” homes focused mainly on the interior of the house. This is clearly revealed in the structure of the itinerant housing exhibition De Thuis (The Home) which was organized between 1949 and 1952 by the Flemish Christian Workers’ Women in collaboration with the Flemish Catholic Workmen. These highly successful events were located in municipal schools, city theaters and parish halls. The 1949 edition of the exhibition consisted of two parts. The first section promoted the single-family house and was based on two successive, contrasting spatial experiences. First, the visitors entered a dark area with a low ceiling where panels with pictures of apartment blocks and slogans as “we hear our neighbor’s every sigh” criticized the housing conditions in the city. The next space was well lit and had a high ceiling. Here, the organizers recommended the visitors to invest in a single-family house and provided the necessary financial information. Drawings and a small-scale model of an “ideal home” suggested a traditionally designed, detached “dream house” in the countryside. The second and largest part of the exhibition was introduced with the sentence “A house is not necessarily a home” and discussed the interior of the house. It consisted of several fully furnished model rooms, representing different parts of a working-class house: the living room, bedrooms, bathroom or washhouse, and kitchen (Figure 5.3). Special attention was also devoted to the use of household appliances.

The exhibition De Thuis stated that a “good” home is a genuine expression of a family life and stimulates a “caring life together.” “Therefore your home has to be properly, efficiently and beautifully arranged,” the catalog explained. This advice was further refined in a set of recommendations which promoted the functional organization of space and the rejection of unnecessary or “false” ornamentation. The Christian Workers’ Women and the Catholic Workmen, for example, advised their members to install an efficient kitchen where the sink, cupboards, gas cooker, etc. were “correctly” situated. They also advocated the functional organization of the other areas of the house. One of the common examples which also occurs in the members’ periodicals concerns the dining room where it was often suggested that the
dining table should be placed against the wall instead of in the center of the room, as in the idealized bourgeois interior arrangements. This simple alteration would create more space for shared activities and would therefore reinforce family bonds.

Together with an efficient spatial organization, the Christian Workers’ Women and the Catholic Workmen strongly recommended the use of furniture and objects with a “simple” and “functional” design, free from “superfluous” or “misleading” decoration. “It is for example not good when something expresses a function which in reality it does not fulfil” the pamphlet *Be happy at home* of the Catholic Workmen explains. Furthermore, “It is also wrong when something fulfils a function which is not expressed. Like an outside lamp which is supported by a familiar seashell motif.” The furniture presented in the *De Thuis* exhibitions was generally made of wood and had a modest and solid appearance. Some of the designs were produced by the Ghent firm Van Den Berghe-Pauvers, with whom the Christian Workers’ Women had already collaborated in the late 1930s. After World War II, Van Den Berghe-Pauvers became a regular participant in the *De Thuis* exhibitions. Its postwar furniture mixed a plain contemporary look with a traditionally based fabrication. The production of the firm more or less became the formal translation of the subdued modernism to which the Christian Workers’ Movement aspired.

At first sight the functionalist design principles of the Christian Workers’ Women and the Catholic Workmen were similar to the ones of the contemporary Belgian avant-garde organization *Nieuwe Vormen* (New Forms). This Brussels-based group of architects, designers, and manufactures also
promoted “modern” furniture for the working class. In the early 1950s one of its members, the interior architect Jos De Mey, even became a regular advisor of the Catholic Workmen and Christian Workers’ Women. His designs – mainly produced by Van Den Bergh-Pauvers – were shown in the model interiors of De Thuis as well as in the housing exhibitions of Nieuwe Vormen. However, in both cases the ideological background of the functionalist credo was fundamentally different. The design educational programme of Nieuwe Vormen was first and foremost part of an avant-garde crusade for cultural progress. Some of the group’s protagonists were inspired by socialist goals, yet the organization itself did not have a political orientation. The Christian Workers’ Women and the Catholic Workmen also aimed at cultural progress, but they explicitly related their actions to their religious belief and ethics. Often “good” or “bad” human qualities were used to describe “good” or “bad” objects or interior arrangements. For example, “misleading” decorations such as the above-mentioned seashell motif were associated with moral deceit. The pamphlet Be happy at home stated: “Lying is not ‘good’; nor should an object lie, everything should express what it really is and additional features should support this purpose.” The same pamphlet rejected an abundant ornamentation in the interior arrangement of the house in favor of an overall expression of “modesty,” another important Christian value. Finally, efficiency was presented as an essential condition of true (religious) beauty, referring to humans as well as objects: “A beautiful human is he whose life is oriented towards its goal, its eternal destination; a beautiful object will be that which harmonically expresses its purpose.”

However, the influence of the Christian ideology especially reveals itself in the way the Catholic Workmen and the Christian Workers’ Women embedded their promotion of efficiency and the use of modest design in a campaign for the primacy of the traditional family. In fact, according to these organizations, a functional interior organization with contemporary furniture did not guarantee a successful result. The Catholic Workmen and the Christian Workers’ Women stated that above all a “good” home has to be “made” by the family itself. “The arrangement (of your house) should not be like an exhibition,” the catalog of De Thuis explained. “It has to be characteristic and lively.” For the male and female “leaders” of the family, this engagement had different meanings.

A “good” home is the housewife’s investment in a new popular culture

Until about 1957 the image of the ideal family promoted by the Christian Workers’ Movement remained traditional. In the perfect household the husband earned a living and his wife stayed at home to take care of the children. This did not imply that workers’ women were meant to take on a subordinate
and obedient role. Already in the interbellum years, the Flemish and franco-phone Christian Workers’ Women encouraged their members to become conscious educators of their children and equal partners of their husbands. After World War II they continued their fight for a better appreciation of women and of their social tasks within the home. Moreover, women were assigned an important cultural responsibility. This was especially the case in Flanders where Philippine Vande Putte became secretary-general of the Christian Workers’ Women. Vande Putte believed that the cruelties of the war could only be overcome by the birth of a new contemporary popular culture. According to her, this could be achieved through the establishment of “good” homes, as this is where every social and cultural existence originates. Due to their special bond with the house, women were considered important protagonists in the whole process. Vande Putte felt it was therefore essential that they would be encouraged to develop culturally themselves. This meant that a woman should have the chance to explore her own caring personality as a mother and have the means and the time to invest in a home, which is the individual expression of her family.

For this reason the Christian Workers’ Women first and foremost warmly recommended the introduction of time and labor-saving modern technology and equipment in the house. Their periodicals published articles on electric cooking, on the new domestic tools presented at the Salons des Arts Ménagers in Paris, and on the efficient arrangement of kitchens, etc. Few working-class families could yet afford many new household tools, but according to Philippine Vande Putte, the introduction of each contemporary appliance was a small step in the right direction. An inquiry organized by the Christian Workers’ Women pointed out that their members mostly desired a sewing machine, a washing and drying machine, and a gas cooker. As a collage in the periodical of the francophone women makes clear, the integration of modern household equipment did not imply that women should leave the house to go shopping, to give themselves a treat in a beauty salon, to enjoy the nightlife or to go out working. On the contrary, the “true” emancipated wife spends her free time with her family, enjoys household work, relaxes in her back garden, and is eager to professionalize her duties.

But by rationalizing household work, a wife still did not have a “good” home. As mentioned above, women were considered responsible for giving the domestic interior a “personal” look which was characteristic of their family. This was a complicated task. “Efficiency”, a “functional arrangement,” and “modest” design had to be combined with an “individual touch.” For this delicate assignment the workers’ women were advised to concentrate on the “living room” or the “all-in-one kitchen-living room” where the working-class family sits around the table to eat and relaxes near the hearth or stove – often the only heating system in the house. “This place is the place of the family,”
Philippine Vande Putte argues in an article in the architectural journal *La Maison*. “It is the centre of the house, where the heart of the family beats.”

According to her, a “good” living room is a space “where life can express itself, where things ‘talk’ and visualize what the family is, what it thinks and what it feels.” To create such a place, the Christian Workers’ Women recommended their members to compose the interior consciously with separate furniture elements according to the inhabitants’ “sentiments” and to integrate several objects with a family history, such as a “grandfather’s chair.” They also encouraged members to display a collection of personal items in the living room, including family pictures, drawings, souvenirs, children’s dolls, and flowers. As the model interiors in the exhibition *De Thuis* and in the women’s periodical show, these small-scale objects could be placed in different locations: on the windowsill, on the table, on a cupboard, in a niche, etc. They were meant to be combined with other small items, such as crucifixes and small statues of saints, that underlined the religious identity of the family. Finally, a “good” living room would also reveal the housewife’s membership of the Christian Workers’ Women. The most obvious sign was the presence of a wall calendar, which was published annually by the organization and included a series of reproductions of twentieth-century Belgian paintings presenting popular or religious scenes. But in many working-class homes art reproductions also reflected the cultural influence of the Christian Workers’ Women.

Combined, these small symbolic objects would turn the room into a personal composition, a still life created by the worker’s wife, representing her commitment. The focus of the living-room arrangement was the mantelpiece, a traditional place for family representation. Also, here the Christian Workers’ Women stressed the importance of a personal touch. In an article titled “How do I dress my mantelpiece?” the women’s periodical presented in detail a “good” example (Figure 5.4). The author Margriet V. describes her own living-room mantelpiece:

![Illustration of the article “How do I dress my mantelpiece?” in the Flemish Christian Workers’ Women’s periodical, Vrouwenbeweging, May 1947](image)
In the middle stands an old-fashioned clock, which used to belong to my grandmother. On the left side we placed a big glass vase, which we received on our wedding day; underneath lies lace from Bruges. The kids make sure that there is always something from outside: catkins, holly, spruce or wild flowers. On the right a photograph of my husband’s father is displayed. . . . On the left side a little stand is placed with a few books, and on the right an ashtray, under which lays our Emma’s first embroidery. Between the portrait and the clock stand a shepherd and shepherdess in biscuit.57

The description did not mention the presence of a crucifix, but as this religious sign features on the living-room mantelpiece of almost every model home of the Christian Workers’ Movement, we can assume that the author considered it evident. The resulting compound image of the space on top of the mantelpiece was a kind of homemade family portrait, which at the same time symbolized the Christian Workers’ Movement’s postwar idea of modern domestic space: a consciously constructed personal refuge within the sometimes threatening outside world, the foundation of contemporary religious practice, and of a new popular culture.

**In the ideal home the husband is a handyman**

The husband’s contribution to the establishment of the postwar Christian modern home literally involved a high amount of “making,” mainly in the sense of handmade carpentry. From the 1930s, the Christian Workers’ Movement had gradually stimulated the involvement of men in domestic life.58

A husband was not only meant to be the breadwinner and stern head of the family, he was also urged to behave as a friendly and caring family man. After World War II, the periodicals of the Christian Workers’ Movement basically pictured the ideal husband as the “handyman of the home.” This was at once an appropriate answer to the financial situation of many postwar families, a suitable concept to compete with the “appealing” modern outdoor life and the means of intensifying the personal character of the home. The suggested tinkering included installing a gas cooker, building a bookcase, a dinner table, or a child’s bed, etc. According to the Christian Workers’ Movement, a “good” husband could make himself useful in every area of the house.

The Flemish Catholic Workmen took several initiatives to encourage do-it-yourself work at home. Often “real” working-class families were chosen as a model to convince the public of the possibilities of handmade carpentry. For example, in the early postwar years the Catholic Workmen regularly organized *Tentoonstellingen van Huisvlijt* (Exhibitions of Home Industry). These local exhibitions generally presented one or more model rooms with furniture and other objects made by members of the Catholic
Workmen’s Associations. The craftwork included cots, cupboards, children’s toys, etc. Photographs of these exhibitions, mentioning each “creator’s” name, profession, and family situation, were published in the workmen’s periodical. Another event explicitly meant to stimulate domestic DIY work among the working class was the competition Help U Zelf (Help Yourself), launched in 1951 by the Catholic Workmen in collaboration with the Christian Workers’ Women. This competition awarded self-made home improvements. Members of the Catholic Workmen’s Associations or the Christian Workers’ Women’s Guilds could send in a form describing their family and presenting the work they had done to make their home a “more hygienic, comfortable and cozy” place to live in. Structural adjustments as well as improvements in the equipment of the house were considered. Some 350 families participated in the competition. To evaluate the entries a touring jury was appointed, consisting of representatives of both the Catholic Workmen and Christian Workers’ Women. The most inventive, preferably low-budget projects were selected and photographed. The winners were awarded with furniture and household equipment such as a kitchen table, medicine cabinet, etc.

Whereas the Exhibitions of Home Industry and the Help Yourself competition initially registered, displayed, and awarded completed DIY projects, other initiatives of the Christian Workers’ Movement were of a more explicit educational nature. For example, from the beginning of 1952, Flemish workers could submit specific questions regarding their own home in order to get free advice on how to rearrange their interior “for the better.” Several of these “case studies” were published and discussed in the workmen’s periodical. Each time the situation “before” and “after” the suggested alterations was presented. In a case study of February 1952, for instance, a family in Houthalen was advised to rearrange their “badly organized” and “cheerless” kitchen by repositioning a door, moving the dining table to the corner, building a bench, adjusting the light, redecorating the walls, etc.

The periodicals of the Catholic Workmen and of the Christian Workers’ Women also provided concrete guidelines for the building of contemporary “modest” furniture. In both magazines construction drawings of simple wooden tables, cupboards, or beds were to be found. The most detailed plans were published in the men’s monthly, in a special DIY column entitled Pier na zijn uren (Peter in his spare time) (Figure 5.5). Some of these designs – mainly those by the interior architect Jos De Mey – simultaneously featured in Belgian avant-garde circles. However, the view on the production process of the furniture was often clearly different. While the Christian Workers’ Movement revalued handwork as an affordable way to improve the interior equipment of the home while also involving the husband, avant-garde organizations as Nieuwe Vormen only advocated industrial fabrication in order to make “good” contemporary design available at reasonable prices.
In general, the content of the home advice in the workmen’s periodical corresponded with that in the workers’ women’s monthly, but while the second discussed a range of topics relating to domestic culture, the first literally focused on the “building” of a “good” home. Both periodicals included articles on how to buy, construct, equip, and furnish a “modern” house, but the women’s magazine also informed its readers on how to cook, sew, nurse, clean, play, relax, and build a family life. This clearly illustrates the different responsibilities that the Christian Workers’ Movement attributed to the male and female head of the family. Men were meant to provide the material framework and financial means to build a healthy home, whereas women had the task of modernizing family life itself and thereby bring the national home culture to a “higher” level.

**Housing the Christian family**

The different responsibilities imposed on men and women by the housing promotion of the Christian Workers’ Movement were not strictly linked with specific areas in the house. The kitchen, for example, was still considered a place where a “good” Christian housewife would spend most of her time cooking and cleaning. Yet it was also an important area for the husband to install labor-saving furniture or gadgets. This explains why in the late 1940s and early 1950s articles on the rational organization of the kitchen appeared in both the men’s and women’s periodicals. In 1948, for instance, the Catholic Workmen’s monthly published a story of a husband who reorganized the kitchen as a present for his wife who was about to return from the maternity
The husband had rebuilt an old cupboard and installed a new gas cooker, a cooker hood, and a new lamp. The author of the article praised the inventiveness of the low-budget solution which would spare the housewife many “unnecessary moves.”

The gender identities constructed by the Christian Workers’ Movement predominantly related to the house as a whole. As explained above, male and female members were instructed to adopt different attitudes, but their “territory” was considered more or less identical and included every area of the domestic interior: the living room, dining area, kitchen, bathroom, toilet, washhouse, storage, and the different bedrooms. This is not surprising. As the Christian Workers’ Movement intended to perpetuate the primacy of family life within postwar society, it was important that husbands and wives were assigned complementary roles that would not divide the home but rather unify it. Cooperation on different levels within the same space and on the same “project” could, after all, intensify the inhabitants’ mutual relations.

The Christian Workers’ Movement’s aspiration to intensify the family relationships through the building of a “modern” home is especially apparent in its advice concerning the spatial needs of children. In both the women’s and the men’s periodicals it was repeatedly stated that children should have, within the house, a “world of their own.” One of the often-suggested solutions to this “problem” was the rearrangement of the attic – directly under the saddle roof – into a room for children. The Catholic Workmen and the Christian Workers’ Women were encouraged to do the necessary timberwork and furnishing themselves, and to engage their children as much as possible so that they would also discover the pleasure of creating a personal environment. An article in a 1949 edition of the women’s periodical showed how a small attic could be converted into a girls’ room. The author tells the true story of Mr and Mrs Vermeulen who wanted to give their daughters their “own space.” As they expected their girls to become housewives one day, they gave the attic room a special character. At night it was a bedroom, but in the daytime it was a regular living room where the daughters could practice freely for their future task. Two specially constructed beds made this transformation possible. By hiding the sheets and bedclothes in the drawers under the mattresses, the beds converted into couches.

As girls were usually the first to obtain a room close to their parents’ bedroom, the converted attic was more often recommended as a bedroom for boys. A 1952 issue of the men’s periodical published an example of such a room, designed by Jos De Mey (Figure 5.6). In the illustration, two simple iron beds were placed along the wall where the ceiling is at its lowest level. The wall next to the beds was finished with wooden boards and a series of ropes suggested a barrier between the two sleeping “units.” Close to the window was a small desk, with some bookshelves on the left and a closed
cupboard on the right. Under the cupboard two wooden slats were attached to
the wall, defining the place where the child was allowed to attach his posters,
photographs, or paintings. Within the framework set out by their parents, boys
were thus encouraged to participate in the making of a “good” home.

According to the Christian Workers’ Movement, making a “good”
home related to all members of the family. Mother, father, and children were
supposed to value and appropriate the interior spaces of the traditional archi-
tectural housing models in a personal way. These individual engagements
were carefully mediated through the movement’s periodicals, lectures, and
housing exhibitions, and corresponded with the traditional gender roles of the
“ideal” Catholic family. In developing a personal bond with the house, every
person, in their own way but together with their close relatives, was able to
find an adequate, Christian-inspired position within modern society and at the
same time to protect themselves from all contemporary outdoor “threats.” By
explicitly involving children in the “making” of the modern home, the Christian
Workers’ Movement furthermore developed a subtle strategy to pass its
housing ideology on to the next generation.

Notes
1 The author is currently working on a Ph.D. project entitled Modernity at Home? An
Architectural History Study of the Mediation of Models of Modern Domesticity in Belgium
1945–1963, under the supervision of Professor Mil De Kooning. This project is part of
the research performed by the Architectural Theory and History research group at the
Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, Ghent University.

The abbreviations of *Kristelijke Arbeidersvrouwengilden* and *Ligues Ouvrières Féminines Chrétienes* are KAV and LOFC respectively.

The abbreviations of *Katholieke Werkliedenbonden* and *Equipes Populaires* are KWB and EP respectively.

See P. Pasture, “Herstel en expansie (1944–1960),” in Gerard, *De Christelijke Arbeidersbeweging in België. Deel 1*, pp. 244–297. The periodicals of the Flemish Catholic Workmen and Christian Workers’ Women were entitled *Raak* and *Vrouwenbeweging* respectively. The monthly magazine of the francophone Christian Workers’ Women was *Vie Féminine*. The *Equipes Populaires* did not have a similar periodical at that time.

The housing education of the Christian Workers’ Movement did not come to an end in the early 1950s, but its intensity slowly diminished. For more information on what enabled the massive postwar growth of the Christian Workers’ Movement, see P. Pasture, “Herstel en expansie (1944–1960),” in Gerard, *De Christelijke Arbeidersbeweging in België. Deel 1*, pp. 13–17.


The success of the membership recruitment of both the Christian Workmen and Workers’ Women was mainly based on door-to-door introductory visits by specially trained and well-informed district representatives.

The social doctrine of the Church was invigorated by several church documents. Besides several messages of Pope Pius XII, in the 1950s the social encyclicals *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) and *Divini Redemptoris* (1937) of Pius XI still played a central role. The Christian Catholic family values and domesticity in postwar Belgium
Workers’ Movement was also inspired by the contemporary philosophical interpretation of Christian personalism (Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier). See P. Pasture, “Herstel en expansie (1944–1960),” in Gerard, De Christelijke Arbeidersbeweging in België. Deel 1, pp. 244–297.

The main authority regarding Christian personalism in Belgium was Canon Louis Janssens. His reflections were distributed on a broader scale by, among others, Canon Antoon Brys. See, for example, A. Brys, “Persoon en Gemeenschap” (“Person and Community”), De Gids op Maatschappelijk Gebied, January 1, 1946, pp. 50–61. See also P. Pasture, “Herstel en expansie (1944–1960),” in Gerard, De Christelijke Arbeidersbeweging in België. Deel 1, pp. 244–297.


Ibid.

Wij bouwen een nieuwen thuis (We are building a new home) (catalog), Brussels: KAV, 1939.

For a discussion of the interwar housing education of the Flemish Christian Workers’ Women, see S. De Caigny, “‘Wij bouwen een nieuwe thuis!’ De gelaagde betekenis van huiselijkheid bij de christelijke arbeidersvrouwen in het interbellum” (“‘We are building a new home!’ The layered meaning of domesticity according to the Christian Workers’ women in the interbellum period”) (unpublished paper), Leuven, 2004.

The Nationale Maatschappij voor Goedkope Woningen en Woonvertrekken or Société Nationale des Habitations et Logements à Bon Marché (National Society for Cheap Houses and Rooms) was founded on October 11, 1919. This was the first national housing body in Belgium. For a discussion on the history of social housing in Belgium, see L. Goossens, Het sociaal huisvestingsbeleid in België. Een historisch-sociologische analyse van de maatschappelijke probleembehandeling op het gebied van het wonen (The social housing policy in Belgium. A socio-historical analysis of the approach of social problems regarding housing), Leuven: Faculteit der Sociale Wetenschappen, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (unpublished Ph.D. thesis), 1982.

Volkswoningen voor onze arbeiders (Popular housing for our workers), in the series ACW-Reeks, 2, Brussels: ACW, 1946.

See Volkswoningen voor onze arbeiders, p. 57.

The study was conducted by an ad hoc commission which was installed by the study service of the ACW. The study report was published in Volkswoningen voor onze arbeiders.

In 1951 Philippine Vande Putte (KAV) was a member of the Hoge Raad voor Volkshuisvesting en Volkswoningen. See Annuaire Administratif et Judiciaire de Belgique et de la Capitale du Royaume (Administrative and Legal Yearbook of Belgium and of the Kingdom’s Capital), Brussels: Etablissements Emile Bruylant, 1951, p. 275. The Hoge Raad voor Volkshuisvesting en Volkswoningen was also called Conseil Supérieur du Logement et de l’Habitation. The French synonym of Nationaal Instituut tot Bevordering van de Huisvesting is Institut National pour la Promotion de l’Habitation.


See KAV-KWB Actiecomité Hulp in Woningnood (KAV-KWB Action Committee Assistance in Times of Housing Shortage) (pamphlet), Brussels: KAV/KWB, s.d. See also “De KWB de ‘lange arm’ van de arbeiders. Hulp in Woningnood levert er het bewijs van” (“The KWB, the workers’ ‘long arm’. Assistance in Times of Housing Shortage proves it”), Raak, 3, 08/1952, p. 5.

“Na de prijskamp . . . Zo ziet gij de goede thuis” (“After the contest . . . This is how you imagine a good home”), Vrouwenbeweging, s.n., September 1949, pp. 6–10.
The touring exhibition *De Thuis* was held ten times between 1949 and 1952. From 1952 until 1957 the Christian Workers’ Women and Catholic Workmen still organized housing exhibitions entitled *De Thuis*. However, these exhibitions had a different format which mainly consisted of one or two fully furnished model homes in new projects of the national housing bodies.

In 1949 the exhibition *De Thuis* received the following amount of visitors: 12,753 in Antwerp, 11,077 in Bruges, 7,773 in Ghent, 7,054 in Hasselt, and 6,921 in Aalst. This information is based on the archives of the Kristelijke Arbeidersvrouwenorden, KADOC, Leuven.

For a description of the 1949 exhibition *De Thuis*, see, for example, “L’exposition itinérante ‘De Thuis’ à Anvers, Gand, Bruges, Hasselt, et Alost” (The itinerary exhibition “De Thuis” in Antwerp, Ghent, Bruges, Hasselt and Alost), *La Maison*, 3, 03/1950, pp. 88–90. The responsible architect was Victor-Frans Mattelaer.

*Tentoonstelling De Thuis (Exhibition De Thuis)* (catalog), Brussels: KAV/KWB, 1949.

See, e.g. R. Van Tenten, “Voor een goede thuis. De woon-eetkamer” (“For a good home. The living and dining room”), Vrouwenvleugelen (unpublished), February 1950. In the late 1940s and 1950s the Christian Workers’ Movement frequently collaborated with the designers and interior decorators Jos De Mey, Rob Van Tenten and Emiel Veranneman.

*Wees thuis gelukkig. Wat kan een man doen om zijn woning zoo aangenaam en nuttig mogelijk in te richten?* (Be happy at home. What can a man do to arrange his house as pleasant and as useful as possible?) (pamphlet), archives of the KWB of Antwerp, 715, KADOC, Leuven, n.d.


The French synonym of *Nieuwe Vormen* was *Formes Nouvelles*. See F. Floré and M. De Kooning, “*Formes Nouvelles* and the communication of modern domestic ideals in postwar Belgium,” in ADDITIONS to architectural history: XIXth annual conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand (available on CD-ROM), SAHANZ, 2002.

Jos De Mey became their regular advisor in 1951, after winning a “national competition of domestic arrangement” organized by the Catholic Workmen and the Christian Workers’ Women. Before that the interior designer Rob Van Tenten often provided the organisations with information and advice concerning the home.

Author’s note.

*Tentoonstelling De Thuis* (catalog).


Ibid.

In general, the *Ligues Ouvrières Féminines Chrétiennes* did not focus as much on cultural issues as did the Flemish Christian Workers’ Women. Nevertheless, they developed several parallel initiatives, such as the publication of a wall calendar and the organization of housing exhibitions etc. See A. Osaer, A. De Decker, N. Ista, and D. Keymolen, “De Christelijke Arbeidersvrouwenbeweging,” in Gerard, *De Christelijke Arbeidersbeweging in België. Deel 2*, pp. 316–411.

Fredie Floré


53 Ibid.

54 See “La fausse et la vraie émancipation de la femme” (“The false and the true women emancipation”), *Vie Féminine* (unpublished), June 1946.


56 Some of the favorite artists of the Christian Workers’ Women were Jules De Bruycker (1870–1945) and Alfred Ost (1884–1945).


64 “Ze kwam terug van ’t moederhuis en ze vond een nieuwe keuken” (“She came back from the maternity hospital and found a new kitchen”), *Raak*, 2, June 1948, p. 8.

65 “Een wonder op zolder en een mirakel in de portemonnaie” (“A miracle in the attic and a miracle in the wallet”), *Vrouwenbeweging*, s.n., February 1949, pp. 16–18.

66 J. De Mey, “Toen we nog rakkers van tien jaar waren . . .” (“When we were ten-year-old boys . . .”), *Raak*, 4, September 1952, pp. 12, 16.
The subject of this chapter is the emergence of dedicated honeymoon resorts in the Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania, USA, post-World War II. At first glance, its inclusion in an essay collection devoted to the theme of gender and domesticity might seem surprising as domesticity still tends to be immediately associated with the home. However, domesticity is a concept that, like public or private, refuses to be pinned down to any fixed set of spatial coordinates. While home may be its most visible and constant spatial referent, domesticity is effectively produced and reproduced across a diffused series of sites that are more properly identified as public, from the pages of women’s magazines to the cookery section of a department store. Far from being disinterested and detached from the “outside” world, then, “the locality and nation invade the home . . . providing cues for behavior in families as they relate to their domestic environment.”¹ And far from lying outside of American public life, domesticity in many ways lies at its heart.

This chapter will argue that domesticity is most usefully understood as a publicly formed and changing set of attitudes, values, and skills revolving around the home – home being both an actual space and a symbol – which are learned, negotiated, or performed by individuals in a variety of settings over
time. Foregrounding the collective and performative nature of domesticity in this way recalls Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) in which the daily interactions which make up social life are compared to theatrical performances. Using dramaturgical principles, Goffman precisely details the conditions under which the individual enacts social roles:

There will be a back region with its tools for shaping the body, and a front region with its fixed props. There will be a team of persons whose activity on stage and in conjunction with available props will constitute the scene from which the performed character’s self will emerge, and another team, the audience, whose interpretative activity will be necessary for this emergence.²

Without denying that there are limits to the analogy between social life and the theatre (limits Goffman himself stressed in the 1959 revised edition of *The Presentation of Self*),³ I intend to borrow elements of his analysis to guide my own. As Phil Manning has observed, Goffman was “acute enough to realize the importance of spatial considerations at a time when these were often thought [. . .] to be inconsequential” and his categorizations have since been applied to a variety of social spaces.⁴ One influential example is Dean MacCannell’s use and elaboration of Goffman’s distinction between front and back regions in analyzing modern tourist attractions.⁵ Another is Karen Halttunen’s use of the front and back region division to make sense of the “polite geography” of Victorian middle-class homes. The example of Halttunen and others reminds us that the home and the relations that play out within it have often been conceptualized in theatrical and performative terms both by historians and, most importantly, by domestic “actors” and “audiences” themselves.⁶

Given its relevance to the study of both touristic and domestic spaces, Goffman’s extended dramaturgical metaphor appears ideally suited to a study of postwar honeymoon resorts in the Poconos. Despite being tourist destinations, these resorts were devoted to the performance of domesticity. Built on the prevailing belief that domestic performance required practice and expert tuition, they were positioned as places where newlyweds could rehearse their new roles without embarrassment or disruption. Not only did they supply young couples with a suitable stage and props, but they also provided them with a team of trained staff and a complaisant audience. The resorts’ credibility as stage-sets was linked directly to their resemblance to the spaces of everyday domesticity, especially the suburban developments that were mushrooming across the east coast of America. However, as we will see, this resemblance was only ever partial, like the newlywed domestic performance itself, encouraging the playing out of a selective and idealized version of domestic life and of the gender roles it entailed.
Newlyweds only

The Pocono Mountains are not immediately an obvious destination for honey-mooning. Typically described as “scenic” with pretty woodlands and rolling hills, the area lacks the sublime natural features that attracted honeymooners to rival North American destinations such as Niagara Falls or Yosemite, or the tropical climate that increasingly drew them to Florida and Hawaii. Ultimately, the area’s success in the postwar period depended on its accessibility: located just a few hours away from New York, Washington, and Philadelphia, it was an ideal getaway spot for young couples who could not afford to fly or to take an extended vacation, but who were able to drive somewhere for a short-term stay. For those who did not own cars, the region was also well served by train and bus.

Capitalizing on the postwar marriage boom, many Pocono establishments began to declare themselves “for newlyweds only” and to cater exclusively to the honeymoon trade early on. The first to do so was The Farm on the Hill which began operating in the mid-1940s. By the late 1950s, there was a wide range of newlywed-only accommodation on offer from The Farm on the Hill to Pocono Gardens Lodge, as well as newlywed-only colonies within larger resorts such as Vacation Valley. Although their ambiance and feel varied substantially, most honeymoon establishments provided guests with an ever-expanding choice of amenities and services (restaurants, outdoor and indoor swimming-pools), and outdoor activities, from boating to archery – all for one set price. The result of this continual expansion and the all-inclusive plan was that larger resorts became self-contained destinations in and of themselves, obviating the need for guests to mingle with non-newlyweds or to venture off the property during their honeymoon.

In considering the appeal of self-contained “newlywed-only” resorts we should recognize that, in order for the couple to rehearse their new roles, newlyweds required a cooperative and tactful audience who would go along with their “projected definitions” of themselves and ignore any slips in their conjugal performance. While established North American honeymoon destinations such as Niagara Falls offered certain advantages to newlyweds – for instance, a spectacular setting for the conjugal performance – they fell short in one respect: they frequently brought newlyweds into contact with other travelers who sought to disrupt or point out flaws in their presentation. Such disruptions, Goffman notes, were a definite source of embarrassment for the actors and of amusement for the audience.

Goffman’s observations about the humor caused by disruptions, both real and fictional, provide a plausible explanation of why the exposure of cracks in the newlyweds’ conjugal performance, particularly sexual ones, was such a staple theme of jokes, comic postcards, cartoons, stories, and film throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A scene from King Vidor’s
1928 film The Crowd is typical: nervously preparing for his wedding night on an overnight train to Buffalo, our “everyman,” John Sims, is mocked by his fellow passengers who identify him by the grains of rice on his clothing and his copy of What a Young Husband Ought to Know. To counter the embarrassment and discomfort caused by such incidents, etiquette and advice, writers constantly warned newlyweds to take precautions to prevent them. These “defensive practices” included recommending that newlyweds remove anything that might identify them as newlyweds (such as confetti or an overly affectionate manner), to taking “retreat” honeymoons that avoided conventional bridal spots such as Niagara Falls and, hence, the crowds of gawpers presumably lying in wait for them.12

In this sense, the postwar Pocono honeymoon resort must have seemed like an ideal solution for newlyweds seeking out sympathetic and controlled audience. It was a purpose-built, homogenous zone from which non-newlyweds were excluded. Some resorts reinforced their exclusiveness by requiring newlyweds to show their marriage certificates at check-in. This was a brilliant move, as it simultaneously legitimated the couple’s presence in the resort community and their newly married status; indeed, the very act of “signing-in” to the resort had resonance, mirroring as it did the signing of the register. Pocono honeymoon resorts further marked their physical and symbolic distinctness from the world outside and the homogeneity of those inside in other ways as well. In order to stake out its boundaries clearly and to highlight the specificity of its residents, Cove Haven, for instance, placed a sign at its entrance announcing “You are Entering the Land of Love” and worked endless references to love, and later to sex, into its iconography, from heart-shaped signage to heart-shaped pools.

Seemingly, a paradox emerges. In the honeymoon resort-world, each couple was celebrated as special, yet found themselves surrounded by others just like them. Rather than cancel out each other’s specialness, however, the sheer volume of newlywed couples seemed to reassure each one of their participation in a significant social practice (marriage or heterosexual coupledom). Furthermore, as all residents were trying out the same routine, everyone had an interest in cooperating with each other’s performances, thus minimizing the risk of disruption. To ensure further that performances went smoothly, a team of resort personnel were always on hand to assist: in smaller resorts, the owners (almost always a married couple) were a constant and reassuring presence; and in the larger ones, social directors were hired to seat the newlyweds with other congenial couples at meals, and to organize mixers and group activities such as tennis tournaments, square dances, or funny-hat nights.

Supervised social encounters such as these were a major part of the resort experience and one that was much appreciated by many newlyweds. If the set-up smacks of a summer camp, we should not forget that
couples at this time usually married young: the average Pocono bride was just 19, while the average groom was 22. The entry of marriage into youth culture postwar, Vicki Howard argues, meant that the entire wedding industry set out to “woo the teen-ager.” The honeymoon business was no exception as entrepreneurs went to great lengths to keep young newlyweds busy and amused, surrounded by other members of their peer group. Nonetheless, access to communal areas and events was always offset by access to more private ones. Specifically, newlyweds were provided with a space where they could make their first attempts at domestic performance – their very own suburban-style cottage.

**Learning from Levittown**

Between the 1940s and 1960s, the majority of honeymoon resorts, such as Strickland’s, Birchwood, Honeymoon Haven, Paradise Valley Lodge, Chestnut Grove Lodge, and Mount Airy, offered some form of cottage accommodation for guests. Cottage colonies such as these had evolved from three types of American roadside lodging: auto camps, cabin camps, and cottage courts, each of which was more sophisticated than the last. While early auto camps were basically campgrounds where motorists could pitch up overnight, deluxe cottage courts in the 1930s and 1940s were made up of cabins with indoor plumbing that could be occupied year-round. Cottage colonies were often more substantial yet, to the extent that they mimicked contemporary suburban architecture in their architecture and design.

The suburban appearance of the Pocono cottage colonies, although not unique, takes on special significance if we consider both the resorts’ location and their typical clientele. Industry insiders and anecdotal evidence suggest that the average Pocono honeymooner in the 1950s was not only young, but also Christian (80 percent Catholic, according to one resort owner’s estimate), white, of modest means, and living within a day’s driving distance of the area. Although it is impossible to tell exactly how many ended up buying a home in the suburban developments nearby, like the Levittown in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, or the Levittown in New Jersey, it seems statistically probable that a good number would have done, as young families fitting the above profile constituted their main trade. Such a move would have been strongly encouraged by postwar advice writers who believed that single-family detached homes alone could provide the spatial privacy necessary to maintain the order and health of the family.

The construction and housing industry, too, saw newlyweds and young married couples as a distinct and desirable market for their products, and sought, wherever possible, to reinforce the appropriateness of single-family homes for them. For instance, at the 1955 national homebuilders’ convention, “U.S. Steel built two hundred model prefab houses, including a
‘bride’s house’ [. . .] that was demonstrated by a ‘model bride’ in a blue negligee” – a gesture that managed to be at once celebratory and salacious. House builders and real-estate companies further targeted the bridal market by cosponsoring and exhibiting at bridal fairs. And bridal magazines also did their bit: alongside their usual features on wedding dresses and honeymoons, *Bride’s Magazine* and *Modern Bride* regularly included articles on buying, decorating, and managing a home; and *Bride & Home* (later incorporated into *House Beautiful’s Decorating for Brides*) sponsored an annual “Bride’s House” exhibition in which rooms from the year’s model home were reproduced in showcase stores, including Kauffman’s in Pittsburgh and Bloomingdale’s in New York.

Studying *Bride & Home*’s Bride’s House gives a more precise idea of what was promoted as an ideal stage for a young married couple. The Bride’s House of 1961 was a US$25,000 ranch-style bungalow of 180 square meters with three bedrooms, two bathrooms, living room, dining room, family room, built-in kitchen, garage and covered patio (Figure 6.1). Its design aimed to strike a balance between convenience and leisure, providing facilities for

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**Figure 6.1**

Bride’s house of 1961
work and storage, as well as for entertaining and hospitality. Space for future children was provided as it was assumed that they would soon follow on the heels of the marriage. In addition, the Bride’s House had several “starring” features, including a choreographed entrance sequence which took guests from an “extra wide covered entry porch” through a “slate-covered” passage-way to steps leading down to the sunken living room. Other fancy touches ranged from the “corner fireplace with raised hearth” in the family room to a “sunken tub” in one bathroom.21

Leaving such features aside, however, the Bride’s House was simply a fancier and costlier version of the typical suburban house then widely available. (At roughly the same time at Levittown, New Jersey, a one-story “Rancher,” complete with built-in kitchen and three bedrooms, could be purchased for US$13,000.)22 Similarly, although their styling superficially differed a great deal – from the austere Colonial cabins at Birchwood to the exotic Mediterranean chalets of Pocono Gardens Lodge – the majority of Pocono cottages resembled suburban homes underneath. Most were fully detached, set apart from their neighbors, and took at least one or two details from the suburban developer’s standard repertoire. Picture windows, sliding glass-doors, patios leading off from the living room, covered entrance or breezeway porches, carports, and driveways. They also borrowed freely from the prevailing suburban iconography: there was a white picket fence surrounding the “Venus” cottages at Chestnut Grove, for instance, and landscaped gardens at Strickland’s upmarket “Mansionette” (Figure 6.2).23

Newlyweds were encouraged to treat the cottages as their own domain for the duration of their stay and a feeling of proprietorship was
constantly reinforced in promotional literature. *Bride’s Magazine*, which wrote countless articles publicizing the Poconos as a honeymoon destination, enthused that “One of the nicest things [about the cottages] is that it gives you the feeling of being a hostess in your own home . . .,” elsewhere promising readers that they would find all Pocono accommodation to be “more like a living place than a hang-your-hat hotel.” And Chestnut Grove’s advertisements assured readers that their cottages would be “long remembered [. . .] as ‘their first home’” (Figure 6.3). This sense of ownership was promoted in practice at resorts such as Honeymoon Haven and Birchwood where name-plates for the new couple were placed on the door of their cottage for the duration of their stay, a gesture that aimed to personalize the experience of staying in what was otherwise generic rented accommodation.

The similarities between the Pocono cottage and the detached suburban home continued from the exterior into an interior that usually consisted of a suite of rooms: bedroom, bathroom, and living room. These rooms were not fully enclosed but, obeying the tenets of contemporary open planning, were subdivided either by screens, built-in pieces such as wood-burning fireplaces or shelves, or variations in room levels. By the late 1950s, some cottages were split-level (for instance, the Lakeside Chalets at Vacation Valley), with sunken living rooms, and raised bathrooms and bedrooms. Levels were further differentiated even within one room as baths were sunken or elevated, and beds were raised on platforms, a trend that would continue into the 1960s and 1970s. Taken together, the cottages’ multiple levels, open vistas, and built-in set pieces, most notably the bed, fireplace, and bath, gave the cottages a stage-like feel.

In fact, these cottages were decidedly theatrical spaces, again not unlike the contemporary suburban developments they resembled. While it
might seem incongruous to think of mass-produced suburban houses as theatrical, Lynn Spigel has convincingly argued that they were “modelled on notions of everyday life as a form of theatre,” as much as any custom-built home, their spaces stages upon which familial and social relations were played out. The theatricality of everyday social relations, Spigel notes, was further enforced by “home manuals, magazines, and advertisements” that treated the home “as showcase, recommending ways to create glamorous backgrounds on which to enact spectacular scenes.”

A influential precedent for treating the home as showcase were the model homes used to sell suburban developments: builders such as Levitt were well aware that people were more inclined to buy if they were shown a house as an assemblage of fully furnished rooms.

Although there are identifiable audiences for these spaces – Spigel suggests suburban residents staged scenes mainly for their neighbors, while model homes were staged for the consuming public at large – who was the audience for the performance staged in the honeymoon cottage? If we adhere strictly to Goffman’s analysis, we would say that the cottage served as a back region where newlyweds were able to discard their social masks and grow accustomed to living together. But, at other times, the cottage served as a front region where newlyweds could rehearse aspects of their domestic performance before a select audience. That a couple could practice hosting duties, for instance, was emphasized in resort marketing. One Honeymoon Colony advertisement featured the testimony of the Clarks who confided to readers that they began to “feel married” in the back region of their cottage: “Betty never remembers to turn off lights. Bob hangs clothes on every available doorknob.” At the end of their stay, however, the Clarks invite an audience of other honeymooning couples into their cottage to host a farewell party.

Even though the example above seems straightforward enough, I would question whether any room in the honeymoon cottage was ever a back region in the sense that Goffman defined it – that is, as an area closed to audiences where the props and activities necessary to sustain the front are concealed. Instead, the cottage corresponded more closely to what MacCannell calls a “staged back region,” a front region set up to look like a back one, often so convincingly that it appears “real.”

Despite the Pocono cottage’s outward resemblance to a typical suburban house, the way in which certain spaces or features were excluded or exaggerated signals its staged nature. Most conspicuously, the cottages reproduced the spaces of domestic leisure and consumption rather than of domestic rationality and work, a fact testified by the absence of functional spaces such as kitchens.

As such, the cottages encouraged a very specific sort of domestic performance, one best described as ceremonial. These spaces were not about the responsibilities of making and keeping a home, but its pleasures and
privileges – hence, the emphasis upon relaxing and entertaining. The primary beneficiary of this staging was the bride, whose experience would no doubt be quite different once she left the resort and took up her domestic duties for real. Looking more closely at its props and decor, it is evident that the staged back region of the cottage was ceremoniously bridal-centric in other ways as well. By aiming to satisfy the desires of the wife, it glorified her centrality to the home and her future role as the primary consumer of household goods.

**What every bride should own**

The success of the Pocono newlywed’s performance did not rest only on having a cooperative audience and an appropriate stage, but also on having the right props to hand. These consisted of the latest consumer products for the home. Some of the most frequently advertised were real log-burning fireplaces, television, hi-fi, wall-to-wall carpeting, and canopy beds. That all of the resorts provided comprehensive lists of their rooms’ contents, furnishings, and appliances, and reproduced photographs of them in advertisements, indicates how important these material products were considered to be for attracting potential guests. In an age when being modern increasingly meant being a full participant in consumer society, these details helped to convey the suites’ modernity and, by extension, that of the couples who chose to honeymoon there. Hence, modern details were even stressed in the colonial-style resorts such as Paradise Valley Lodge whose “faultlessly furnished” Early American cottages were reportedly enhanced by “gay 20th century touches such as pink striped sheets, music when you enter, electrified lanterns for lights.”

Considering the emphasis on modern consumer products and decor, we should not forget that these advertisements appeared primarily in bridal magazines where, for every honeymoon advertisement, there were at least five others for home-furnishing and electronics companies such as Ethan Allen, Hoover, and General Electric. In order to increase their share of the lucrative wedding market, advertisements for the latter companies were customized to appeal to brides. For instance, an advertisement for Hamilton Beach depicts a bride in her wedding gown smiling down beatifically upon a new fry pan, coffeemaker, toaster, and mixer, while the text reads, “Choose Hamilton Beach – you’ll have a whole lifetime to be glad” (Figure 6.4). Companies produced bridal advertisements fully aware that marriages effectively justified once-in-a-lifetime spending sprees, as newlyweds purchased goods for their new household, and family and friends purchased goods on their behalf, trying to start them off with at least some of the trappings of a middle-class lifestyle.

Also noteworthy about wedding-gift giving – something that is implicit in the Hamilton Beach advertisement – is that, like most other events surrounding the wedding, it revolved around the bride. Many gifts, for
instance, were meant to form part of the bride’s trousseau which, in addition to traditional items such as linens, bedding, and pots and pans, now also included items such as glassware, and kitchen equipment from carpet sweepers to mops and jelly molds. Trousseaus not only anticipated the bride’s future role as homemaker and hostess, but also marked her as the main consumer of household goods. The connection between brides and these goods was also stressed in bridal magazines by the number of articles that aimed to educate brides and young wives on how to become discerning domestic consumers; regular columns such as “Bride and Broom” mingled with special features such as “What you should know about Carpet Fibres” or “What every bride should own.”

In referring to the privileged link between women, domestic consumption, and the home, we are touching a subject that has been ably covered by many cultural and design historians. In particular, Penny Sparke argues that the 1950s saw the “re-energised domestification of women,” as housewives were urged from all sides to become “nurturants, beautifiers and consumers” and to conform to the clear gender roles and sexual division of labor that existed prior to World War II. Sparke further notes that manufacturers’ acknowledgment of women’s influence over household spending led to the “overt aesthetic feminisation of goods in this period, manifested in an explosion of pink radios, coloured appliances and a preponderance of pattern and texture in the domestic interior.” Both the reinvigorated ideal of
womanhood and the aesthetic feminization of goods helped to enforce a “frilly” model of femininity that, in turn, visibly shaped the decor and choice of props introduced into the Pocono honeymoon cottage.33

In addition to offering modern gadgets and furnishings – items that young couples might reasonably hope to acquire before long in their own homes – most cottages also offered some luxurious extras. As in the ideal Bride’s House, these were often located in the bathroom and included items such as professional hairdryers, Florida sun-lamps, “Hollywood” tiled baths, or Roman sunken-tile baths. Most spectacular of all was the bathtub in The Roman Forum Suites at Pocono Gardens Lodge. An oversized round bathtub built on a platform, surrounded by mirrors, flowering plants, and a Roman bust, this magnificent pink-tiled, blue-carpeted creation epitomized the Populuxe spirit of the decade.34 It was also clearly designed to sell the resort to the female readership of bridal magazines, as the baths invoked a distinctly feminine ethos of pampering and care. In contrast to the strong emphasis on “togetherness” which prevailed in most images of the honeymoon resorts, pictures of the Roman Forum bath focused exclusively on the bride grooming herself in front of a mirrored dressing-table (Figure 6.5).

This emphasis on female self-indulgence became even more overt in later ads for Pocono Gardens Lodge’s Royal Suites that featured a woman enjoying a bubble bath in a 6 by 6 meter bathroom, again surrounded by exotic plants, Roman statuary, and mirrors. The dramatically “heightened symbolism” of these bathrooms again reminds us that, even in the privacy of the bathroom, newlyweds were never completely off-stage.35 And in the same way that the staged back region confounds the distinction between front and back region, so too does it confuse the distinction between audience and performer, and even between performance and “personhood”36 for, as the preponderance of mirrors suggests, the performance enabled by these spaces was not public and oriented outwards, but personal and oriented inwards. On the reflective surface of the Royal Suite’s walls, a bride could watch herself luxuriating, film-star style in the foamy bath, playing out the normative idea of “frilly femininity.” More cynically, we might suggest that this scene was also staged for the benefit of the husband, with the wife being viewed as a prop, a glamorous complement to the domestic setting.

Above all, the bath at Pocono Gardens Lodge confirms that these cottages were feminized spaces, in the sense that they catered to a female audience of consumers and embodied a feminine aesthetic. We need only think of Honeymoon Haven’s decision to dub its cottages “Cinderella Coaches” to recognize how consciously, through such props, the company set out to create a fairytale setting that would accord with female expectations and desires. This feminine aesthetic prevailed in the honeymoon cottages until the mid-1960s when the function and purpose of the cottages began to shift,
Honeymoon Luxury

BEYOND IMAGINATION
FOR NOTHING TAKES THE PLACE
OF BEING HERE!

Dreaming Honeymoon dreams? Envision the most romantic accommodations in the world... the fabulous ROMAN FORUM SUITES at Pocono Gardens Lodge.

The exquisite living room and bedroom, furnished in elegant Italian provincial... authentic Roman bath -- with its pool-like sunken tub that glows in the beauty of pink mosaic tile... the splendor of the 3-room ROMAN FORUM SUITES will make you gasp with delight.

It's the perfect retreat from the everyday life for the most important days of your life. You can only try to picture yourself in this wonderful honeymoon setting... but nothing takes the place of being here.

6.5

Advertisement for Roman Forum Suites at Pocono Gardens Lodge
most notably with the introduction of Cove Haven’s famous heart-shaped tub. As they became evermore plush, dramatically lit, literal in their symbolism, and Brobdignanian in their proportions, Pocono honeymoon cottages became less about creating a homelike atmosphere and more about providing a fantasy stage-set for sex. This shift related to general social and cultural changes, such as the greater importance placed on sexual gratification in marriage and the popularization of prop-filled erotic environments by *Playboy*. However, the shift from the pink sunken tub to the crimson heart-shaped one, also reflected the decline of frilly femininity itself and the link between female self-fulfillment and the home.

**The world is a wedding**

With their separateness and emulation of suburban homes and interior environments, Pocono honeymoon resorts in the 20 years after World War II sought to provide newlyweds with a suitable setting for staging their first domestic performances. The version of domesticity the resorts promoted was both feminized and commodified, as well as being circumscribed in other quite specific ways. By renting a honeymoon cottage, newlyweds stepped onto a pre-existing touristic stage where all domestic and consumption decisions had been made on their behalf. Most resorts were not yet run by corporations as they later would be, but were mum-and-dad operations whose owners adapted existing designs with proven popularity, such as the suburban ranch house to newlywed use. At times, as at Pocono Gardens Lodge’s Roman Forum Suites or Strickland’s Mansionettes, these attempts reached the level of parody, and the manner in which they suppressed some domestic details and highlighted others, gave their game away.

Pocono honeymoon cottages were not concerned with reflecting existing domestic arrangements, at least not as most people knew or would experience them; certainly, in their modernity and completeness, the cottages were probably unlike the real domestic environments to which most newlyweds would have returned directly after their honeymoon. These resorts were idealized settings where everything was included (accessories, meals, and activities), and the frictions and complications of the conjugal performance were mediated and managed (by owners, social directors, and the structure of resort life itself). And the specific version of domesticity resorts offered to newlyweds was selective and positive, too, like a *Bride & Home* feature come to life. Indeed, with their soft color-coordinated schemes, Hollywood tubs, and spatial privacy, what young bride, even one experiencing some ambivalence about her future role, would envision such a home as the site of domestic labor or, possibly, of loneliness and struggle?

Not surprisingly, the production of a reassuring, even seductive, image of domestic life was the point of these cottages. Goffman himself
noted that social performances and settings are always idealized, as they express not simply the individual’s moral values, but those of the community at large. Significantly, he concludes his discussion of their affirmative nature by stating, “The world, in truth, is a wedding.” Goffman’s choice of metaphor is no accident: he understood fully that there are no more celebratory social performances than those surrounding marriage. Even today, they remain not only the most choreographed of all performances, but also require the most elaborate settings and props. (Consider the bride’s white gown, her attendants, ring, flowers, and the luxurious rented setting.) And it is in this light that we must also understand the Pocono honeymoon cottage. It was a dream space that, like the domestic performance itself, sought to exemplify “the officially accredited values of society” such as familialism, home ownership, and consumption.

However, to counterbalance this image of the honeymoon cottage – as a manipulative agent of patriarchal order – I would also emphasize that the success of the domestic performance ultimately depended on the commitment of the actors and their audience for, despite the best efforts of the honeymoon resorts, there were inevitably instances where both the conjugal and domestic performances of newlyweds were disrupted or derailed. These disruptions indicate that, while the domestic ideal was pervasive and exerted a powerful hold socially, it was subject to constant interrogation, qualification, and challenge in practice, a conclusion that chimes with Joanne Meyerowitz’s observation that 1950s’ domesticity was never as hegemonic as its most famous critic, Betty Friedan, presented it. Certainly, it seems undeniable that the moment one recognizes that domesticity is not passively experienced but actively performed, one must admit the possibility of variation, of choice, and of conflict in its enactment, as well as acknowledge the contingent and personal factors that shape each one.

Finally, the danger of pointing to the staged nature of Pocono honeymoon resorts and the spaces of suburban domesticity is that it seems to imply that authentic experiences cannot take place in them (not, coincidentally, a charge that modernist critics have consistently levelled against both suburbia and popular tourist destinations since the 1940s). The work of MacCannell, however, hints that a more nuanced approach is possible. MacCannell observes that the belief that true experiences only occur in back regions is the result of having conceptualized social space into front and back regions in the first place, a structural division that equates the former with performance (inauthenticity) and the latter with intimacy (authenticity). By contrast, MacCannell states that front and back regions are best regarded as “ideal poles of experience” rather than descriptions of reality, and questions whether “truth” is automatically revealed the moment one moves off-stage. I would push his question further to ask whether a decisive moment or performance is
ever possible, for surely, if the Pocono honeymoon cottage has anything to tell us about domesticity generally, it is that no single domestic performance is definitive. While the Pocono honeymoon cottage set the stage for an important performance, it was ultimately just the first of many that would be played out in years to come.

Notes
4 Manning, p. 75.
9 In 1961, there were about 20 resorts that either exclusively catered to newlyweds or offered special accommodation for them. By the end of the decade, Newsweek reported that 25 Pocono resorts together brought in 115,000 honeymooners and US$30 million a year. “Honeymoon Havens,” Newsweek, June 23, 1969, p. 90.
12 Goffman’s discussion of exposure and defensive practices is on pp. 23–26.
17 “Honeymoon Havens,” p. 90, and M. Seligson, pp. 248–249. It is difficult to gage to what extent Jews and African Americans were discriminated against in the postwar era, although Squeri notes that it was common in the 1920s and 1930s. These groups responded by creating their own establishments or frequenting ones where they would be welcomed. For instance, Seligson notes that Jewish newlyweds steered clear of the Poconos, preferring Catskill resorts instead. Squeri, pp. 165, 180–183, 187.
22 Gans, p. 7.
26 Spigel, pp. 219–221. A further proof of the glamour being given to domestic life is the vogue for the so-called “Hollywood Modern” style in suburban home decor (although more traditional “Colonial” styles were also popular at the time). Gans, pp. 270, 299, fn. 43.
33 Sparke, pp. 166, 171–172.
35 Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour identified “heightened symbolism” as one of the defining characteristics of “pleasure-zone architecture” and of Levittown. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, pp. 53, 153.
36 Manning, pp. 76–77.
38 Goffman, pp. 44–45.
39 For instance, in the Newsweek article on the Pocono honeymoon phenomenon, the reporter noted that fights were frequently started by drunken young husbands, convinced that their new “friends” and new wives were flirting. Newsweek, p. 169.

MacCannell, p. 95.
Sexual articulations

Sexual metaphors underlie much of our discourses on space and architecture. As a matter of fact, architecture itself is underwritten by phallocentric premises based on the mastery of the male subject, the stability and permanence of the built object, and the hierarchical arrangement of spaces. The notion of domesticity, on the other hand, is burdened with a large number of assumptions that link it with the heterosexual couple and the single-family household. The chapters in this section explain, question, and unveil the sexual undertones of architectural discourse and practice in the domestic sphere. By surfacing the implicit assumptions underlying domestic practices, they pave the way to imagine domesticity differently. Their varying emphasis ranges from practical to discursive and theoretical spheres.

The first two chapters deconstruct our underlying assumptions of domestic terms by revealing their sexualized connotations. These connotations surface hierarchized gender constructions that retain the phallocentric premises of the architectural discipline. Karina Van Herck’s chapter is an analysis of the gendered associations of one of the most familiar terms that describe domesticity – coziness. Focusing on the historical avant-garde’s texts that argue against coziness, she demonstrates both the historicity of this concept and how it is entangled with gender identities. Despina Stratigakos shows the degree of threat that the feminine figure posed to the architectural discipline in modern Germany by drawing on a broad range of period writings that represent women architects as lesbians. She argues that the figure of the lesbian architect marked an uncanny familiarity with the masculine ideal that dominated professional discourse and represented a dangerous trans-gendering of architecture itself.

The other three chapters in this section mark adventures to uncharted architectural terrains. Focusing on specific historical instances, they explore possibilities of ways of imagining architecture other than those offered by a standard disciplinary vocabulary. As such, these chapters demonstrate that architecture can speak other languages. Katarina Bonnevier offers a critical reading of Eileen Gray’s E.1027, which she interprets as “a performative
challenge to the heterosexual matrix.” She shows how some of the fundamental architectural gestures of that house challenge our given disciplinary categories, such as the hierarchies of the public and the private and structure and ornament. As such, Bonnevier sees this house as “a feminist critique of the culture of architecture.” Lilian Chee’s essay too enables us to view architectural discourse from a non-phallocentric perspective. Via her analysis of Sylvia Plath’s London blue plaque house, Chee attends to the mutual inscriptions of the architectural object and the biographical subject. Exploring possibilities of “transforming biographical documents into spatial ones,” she introduces the element of intimacy to architectural methodology.

Laura Miller’s contribution is an exploration of how spatial and gender stereotypes and the notion of domestic propriety are challenged by violence, which is always already present in domestic spaces. Using forensic investigation as a metaphor and Frances Glessner Lee’s spatial biography as a case study, she discloses how the boundary between domestic interiority and thespectatorial gaze is transgressed to reveal the tenuousness of our assumptions about middle-class domesticity.

Although each of these chapters has a specific and historically rooted subject of analysis, they also address larger issues of theoretical significance that exceeds the historical focus at hand. In sum, the contributions to this section thematize the sexual articulations of architectural space and challenge the underlying masculine metaphors of the architectural discipline.
“Only where comfort ends, does humanity begin”

On the “coldness” of avant-garde architecture in the Weimar period

Karina Van Herck

*Modern architecture and the suppression of coziness*

In 1919 Adolf Behne wrote the remarkable sentences:

Glass has an extra-human, super-human quality. Therefore, the European is right when he fears that glass architecture might become uncomfortable. Certainly, it will be so. And that is not its least advantage. For first of all the European must be wrenched out of his coziness. Not without good reason the adjective “gemütlich” intensified becomes “saugemütlich” (swinishly comfortable). Away with coziness! Only where comfort ends, does humanity begin.¹

Behne’s statements are striking in their extremity. They are part of a visionary appeal for a radical architecture, which was typical of the avant-garde discourse in the Weimar period. Glass, “a completely new and pure material.”²
was seen as the obvious symbol of a transparent architecture which was supposed to bring about a new cultural and social order in the confusing years immediately after World War I. Behne’s statements are indicative of the rather ponderous dealings with the notion of “coziness” in the discourse of the modernist avant-garde. His appeal to do away with coziness was idiosyncratic, but rather typical of an attitude which was fairly common in the avant-garde of the 1920s. The basis of this attitude has been laid in the 1920s and 1930s of the twentieth century. One can refer to Le Corbusier’s attack on the cozy interior as a “sentimental hysteria” which is rooted in feelings of loss caused by modernity, or to Bruno Taut’s consideration of the cozy practices of the inhabitants as an almost primitive or neurotic ritual of “rugglueing,” or to Hannes Meyer’s statement that coziness (Gemütlichkeit) is something that should find its place in “the heart of the individual” and not on “the wall of his home.”

At first glance this resistance against coziness can easily be understood as a reaction against the sumptuous way bourgeois notions of domesticity found expression in the interior. When the notions of cleanliness, simplicity and order became gradually more important in European culture, the notion of coziness consequently came under attack. The architectural avant-garde, however, especially the one in Holland and Germany, is so extremely hostile towards the idea of a cozy interior that one is led to believe that there is more at stake than hygienic or aesthetic considerations. Coziness, wrote Behne, for instance, is not a value in itself, but “the dull vegetative state of jellyfish-like comfort in which all values become blunted and worn.” He associated coziness with the loss of values, with a loss of content.

According to social and cultural historians, the notion of coziness has its origins in the nineteenth century. The up-and-coming new bourgeois culture increasingly posed the ideal of warmth and coziness against the cold, formal codes of the court culture. They also saw the cozy interior as a retreat from the coldness brought about by urbanization and industrialization. The emergence of the culture of coziness was thus part of the rising ideology of the private home as a safe haven within the chaos of modernity. It was related as well to the rise of capitalist consumption culture, and to the feminization of the domestic sphere in bourgeois culture. On the level of material culture, coziness referred in the first place to the practice of decorating the interior, of “clothing,” “dressing,” and “filling” the empty, naked space of the house with all kinds of objects, souvenirs, cushions, and curtains. At the same time, however, coziness referred to the pleasure of being together, of experiencing the warmth of an informal conviviality. Coziness still has, up until today, these two main connotations (which we can find, for instance, in the dictionary Cobuild): it refers first of all to an agreeable, comfortable interior, and second, to an intimate and sociable togetherness – to the cozy moment.
common denominator in these two levels of meaning is the creation of an atmosphere, or *Stimmung*, either through informal interaction with other people or through material culture in which people experience a mental state of well-being, of contentment. As anthropologists point out, the evocation of feelings of interiority plays an important role in the experience of coziness.\footnote{11}

The rejection of coziness by many protagonists of modern architecture concerns how modernity is understood within their discourse. Three major lines of argumentation seem to inform the rejection of coziness: first, an argument in which modernity is defined in “cold” terms such as purity, functionality, transparency, openness, hygiene; second, an argument in which modernity is understood in terms of social equality, leading to the demand to abolish coziness, for the sake of the proletarization of culture and the emancipation of women, and third, an understanding of modernity dominated by a heroic idea of progress that necessitates the liberation of man from symbiotic and constraining structures. Sometimes these different lines of argumentation are quite distinct from one another, but just as often they merge, leading to a constant shift in meaning. The common denominator between the three arguments relies on the idea that the bourgeois cult of coziness is based on arbitrary, unjust power relations that result in feelings, habits, and practices that resist the burgeoning modernity, whereas this modernity could bring emancipation, rationality, social equality, and purity.

**“Erase the traces!“**: Walter Benjamin’s reading of the cozy interior

Walter Benjamin is adamant about the necessity to reject the nineteenth century ideal of cozy dwelling in order to reach the proper way of life for the twentieth century. In “Experience and Poverty”\footnote{12} he advocates the utopian ideal of living in a house of glass in which, along with every single trace of coziness, also every trace of the inhabitant would be erased. This utopian ideal can be considered as the inversion of the interpretation of the nineteenth-century bourgeois interior that Benjamin developed in The Arcades Project\footnote{13} and in “Experience and Poverty.” At the same time, it is the counterpart of his observation that in 1927 post-revolutionary Moscow people no longer “reside” but “camp” in unadorned and scarcely furnished rooms, in which, along with the last remnants of “coziness”, the “melancholy with which it is paid for” has radically been expelled.\footnote{14}

According to Benjamin, clothing and enveloping dominate the nineteenth-century interior. In the nineteenth century, the interior has become something of a shell, a cocoon, which fully encloses and encases the inhabitant. This inhabitant covers floors, windows and walls; he indefatigably invents coverlets and cases for storing “his slippers and his watches, his blankets and his umbrellas.”\footnote{15} He thus displays a marked preference for soft materials, “for velour and plush, which preserve the imprint of all contact.”\footnote{16}
is not only a cover, but also a soft foundation on which the inhabitant can leave his traces, his imprint. From a psychological point of view, Benjamin understands this need for leaving traces as a compensation for “the absence of any trace of private life in the big city”\(^{17}\), as a compensation, that is, for the anonymity and objectivity of public space. In Benjamin’s account, the cozy interior figures as the last trench of individuality that keeps the equalizing forces of modernity at a safe distance. The “warmth” of the interior implies that personality, threatened to be erased in the distress of modernity, can be recharged over and over again, precisely because of the plush and velvet constantly maintaining its imprint.

What the inhabitant of the cocoon finds every time he comes home is “himself.” This “self” coincides with the private individual stripped of all his public and social concerns. Whereas the individual “in the office has to deal with realities,” he desires for “the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions.”\(^{18}\) The “phantasmagorias of the interior” consist in the fact that all realities, all “business interests” and the “clear perception of [the] social function” are being dissipated.\(^{19}\) In other words, that which threatens to vanish in the coziness of the interior is not only the objective societal reality, but also the consciousness of this reality, the human ability of insight and reflection: the rational and social dimension of man.

According to Benjamin, the coziness of the cocoon not only compensates for the impersonal qualities experienced in city life, but is also a way of defense against this cold outside world that pervades the human inner world. In nineteenth-century interiors, Benjamin writes, the covering of floors, walls, and windows is no longer a matter of physical warming, but rather of resistance against the nascent glass and iron constructions.\(^{20}\) Between the lines, it can be inferred from Benjamin’s writings that the culture of coziness asserts itself precisely because of modernity’s equalizing tendency which threatens to disrupt the strict demarcation of the public and the private, of the outside and the inside. Coziness is shown as a “figure” that in a defensive way emphasizes differences, between inner and outside world, between individual and society and among individuals themselves. Benjamin thus refuses to see the cozy cocoon as a warm, enclosing sphere, analyzing it rather as an ossified sphere of egocentric individualism, as an anti-social sphere. In the privacy and the comfort of an over-determined interior the private individual focuses solely on himself:

If you enter a bourgeois room of the 1880s, for all the coziness it radiates, the strongest impression you receive may well be, “You’ve got no business here”. And in fact you have no business in that room, for there is no spot on which the owner has not left his mark – the ornaments on the mantelpiece, the antimacassars on
the armchairs, the transparencies in the windows, the screen in front of the fire.  

It is this superabundance of the inhabitant’s “traces,” understood as the egocentric and excluding cult of individualizing and privatizing that Benjamin attacked. Moreover, as he wrote in his essay on Moscow, it is capitalist consumption need that underlies this “inhuman” tendency: “Such petty-bourgeois rooms are battlefields over which the attack of commodity capital has advanced victoriously; nothing human can flourish there again.”  

Summoning the revolutionary idea of a classless society, Benjamin intended to break open the cozy cocoon. Referring to Bertold Brecht’s motto “Erase the traces!” (“Verwisch die Spuren!”), he presented living in a house of glass as the utopian ideal for the twentieth century. For it is precisely the merit of glass architecture that it creates spaces where it is hard to leave any traces: “glass is such a hard, smooth material to which nothing can be fixed.” At the same time, it is a “cold and sober material . . .. Objects made of glass have no ‘aura’. Glass is, in general the enemy of secrets. It is also the enemy of possession.” Through this cold utopian ideal of living in a house of glass, Benjamin rejects the bourgeois ideal of privacy within the walls of the home because it dissimulates secrecy as intimacy, egocentricity as individualism and indifference as coziness. Concepts conventionally associated with the home are thus disrupted in his advocacy of a new form of dwelling associated with transparency, with openness and with socialization.  

The twentieth-century person who is up to this new form of dwelling can be considered a collective being who is rational and heroic, and who bears, moreover, clearly masculine overtones. “To live in a glass house,” Benjamin stated, is not only a “revolutionary virtue par excellence. It is also an intoxication, a moral exhibitionism, that we badly need.” It is prefigured by “the men who have adopted the cause of the absolutely new and have founded it on insight and renunciation.” Notwithstanding the collective ideal, the individual that has the courage to adopt this new way of dwelling displays the features of an ongoing process of individualization, which Norbert Elias describes as “a transition to a next level of self-confidence, through which the built-in self-control of emotions and the reflective distance increases and the spontaneity of affective acting decreases.” Along with striving towards an open society and social equality, a structure of personal identity appears which is marked by rationality, and by a realization of the self that takes place in the public sphere and through action, rather than within the home and the family, or through the object world.  

It is clear that in this view the new way of dwelling suppresses the idea of the home as the personal sphere of living and as the personalization of a pregiven architectural space. This strategy thus implies the cutting of
emotional ties to the world of things. The actual realization of such a new
dwelling ideal requires strong disciplinary measures, since people tend to stick
to “old” dwelling patterns. This becomes uncannily evident in Bruno Taut’s Die
neue Wohnung (The New Dwelling), written in 1924.

Living in cold splendor: Bruno Taut’s abolishment of
coziness as superfluity

Die neue Wohnung promoted the rationalization of the household as a means
for the emancipation of woman from the slavery of domestic work. It is one of
the most influential writings of the Weimar period on the reform of domestic
space.29 Die neue Wohnung dealt with the rationalization of the household
through architecture: through the introduction of the rational kitchen and the
rational plan layout with labor-saving techniques. Its predominant motive
nevertheless was rational and simple dwelling as an inhabitant’s practice. Taut
did not address architects, but wrote for an audience of housewives on the
pretext that “Der Architekt denkt, die Hausfrau lenkt” (The architect thinks,
the housewife rules).

Taut’s leitmotif for rationalization is the “elimination of atavisms”
(Beseitigung der Atavismen) which he recognized in the remnants of the
“sumptuous Orient” of the Gründerzeit apartments, as well as in all kinds of
concavities and dysfunctional elements. It is only when these atavisms are
eliminated, he argued, that a desire for a new architecture can arise:

If, now, a mouse cannot hide in the living room any longer, if the
mustiness has disappeared, if the windows, lamps and tables are
no longer covered with skirts and underskirts, then one shall
no longer expect anything else from the house itself. One’s ideal
shall no longer be found in attic windows with lots of cuttings and
flowerpots, or in the gingerbread houses after the model of mis-
conceived farmhouses, with multicolored shatters displaying little
painted hearts . . .30

The elimination of such atavisms, rooted in romantic and nostalgic
images of dwelling, was, however, not so easy because, as Taut recognized,
inhabitants are emotionally attached to the things that surround them. They
could not readily be persuaded to distance themselves from the possessions
they collected throughout the years, even if these possessions threatened to
cause the nervous breakdown of the housewife and thus the destruction of
family life. The issue of “emotional matters” ought, therefore, to play a more
important role in the discourse on rationalization and emancipation.31 It
was the “affective moments” with their “aesthetic tendencies and appear-
ances” that should actually be put under the microscope.32 The urge for
coziness was, according to Taut, the “affective moment” that led to the profusion of objects in the house. Moreover, it was woman herself who displayed this urge, since

[s]he wants to create a cozy, agreeable [gemütlich] atmosphere for herself and her husband and she does this out of habit with all kinds of paintings, mirrors, coverings, curtains over curtains, cushions on cushions, carpets, clocks, the display of pictures and souvenirs, knick-knacks, and so on.\(^{33}\)

Taut’s problem, it appears, is not so much the urge itself for coziness, but rather the shape this urge had taken out of habit. It was thus the “superfluity” of the dwelling (das Überflüssige der Wohnung) that should be questioned:

[it is] all the same whether Jugendstil, Neubiedermeier or Expressionism went over it, all the same whether the separate pieces have any artistic value or belong to the realm of kitsch. Fundamentally, it is the superfluity of the dwelling which is at stake.\(^{34}\)

In Taut’s account, it is not coziness as the longing for an agreeable atmosphere that is rejected (a little further in the text he even referred to the circle as an adequate form for creating coziness)\(^{35}\), but rather the superfluous, the surplus, the excess. This coincides, as in Benjamin’s call to “erase the traces” with the inhabitant’s personal fabric which defiles and overrun the house.

For Taut, the problem with superfluity is in the first place its dustiness that condemns woman to endless sweeping. At the same time, however, there is another idea that underlies the demand to do away with everything superfluous – that is, the idea of purification as the pursuit of the essential, of the “naked.” This idea of purification, of cleaning and tidying, dominates the discourse of modern architecture. It can also be found, for instance, in the writings of Mart Stam who equated the superfluous with the representative: “[T]he representative is no human measure, but excess (over-measure). It intends to impress, it wants to show more than there really is.”

Excess blurs the understanding of an underlying, objective truth. It opposes the demand of authenticity. At the same time, however: “[e]xcess is a sign of unscrupulousness, of an antisocial attitude to life, especially at a time when the bare essentials of life are not accessible to thousands among the working class.”\(^{36}\) In the credo “nothing superfluous,” an architectural-aesthetical ideal of purity converges with a social ideal of total equality. This convergence is also present in Taut’s writings. Simplicity in the interior meant to him the rational use of scarce means, and this aimed at the redistribution of capital and goods (housing) among the workers. In a seemingly paradoxical way, the ideal
of providing the “good life” thus led towards an ascetic ideal which Benjamin called the “new poverty” (Figures 7.1 and 7.2).

This ideal of the “new poverty” implied new concepts of dwelling, daily life, and personal identity that were believed to be emancipatory. Like Benjamin, Taut states that the removal of the superfluous will free man from oppression and immobilization through possessions. By freeing inhabitants from their “self-imposed slavery by things”, mobility, time, sociality, and money could be gained, as well as “freedom for the unfolding of the personality.” In Taut’s account as well, personal identity is constructed through actions and dynamic performance, rather than through static identification with objects. It is a “naked” identity no longer based on exterior signs. Taut likewise understood inhabitation as a complex structure of movements rather than as an appropriation of architecture through objects and fabrics. He advocated a unity of practices and aesthetics that would result in a redefinition of the idea of home:

The practical and the aesthetic as a unity; hence the ideal dwelling is totally beautiful. A shell of the human person, his protection, his
vessel of the first and last thoughts, words and deeds, his “nest”. The tangible form of this nest will be totally different than it was the last 50 years [ . . . ] No traces of touching sentimentality, of a romantic idyll, or of dream intoxication, they will be absent from the home just as they are absent in the dynamo halls and control rooms of power plants. The home will first of all be conceived in relation to the intimacy of the most private, the most proper of human life.40

The new ideal of the house takes its leave from the nineteenth-century romantic and sentimental exaggeration and enwrapping, in favor of an art of living that glorifies “cold splendor” (Kalte Pracht).41

Taut, however, was well aware that the implementation of this new ideal of dwelling would encounter difficulties. Initially, the inhabitants will experience the emptiness of the interior as cold and naked, as too primitive and too puranist. It “might have become better lately,” Taut wrote, “but it still is the case that the wall without pictures is perceived as cold and the room in all its simplicity and clarity as naked.”42 Whereas, however, habituation should be capable to change these connotations, a bigger problem resided in the social element, for “examples do not work from bottom to top, but the other way around. The servant-girl likes to dress like the lady and the worker in his house cannot become bourgeois fast enough.”43 Since superfluity represented the bourgeois ideal of homeliness, it was considered by the workers as a sure sign of newly acquired dignity and prosperity. The ideal of simplicity and purity goes against strong mechanisms of social differentiation. In order to deal with this aggravating condition, Taut appealed to the virtue of courageous action. It took courage to live in the new house, to pursue the purist ideal of simplicity, to resist the neighbors’ and family’s criticism, to detach oneself from the things in the house.44

The ideal of living “naked” implied, therefore, some rather uncanny disciplinary aspects, as highlighted in a passage in which Taut stated the necessity of forcing children to part with half of their toys each year. This was necessary, he claimed, not only for the benefit of the housewife who sees her burden of tidying thus diminished, but even more so for the physical and mental well-being of the child:

The mother’s heart that is touched at this point, ought to keep in mind that a mother often has to force children – from an overall view that reaches beyond the crying over an old doll that has been burnt or given away- to accept things that will not immediately please them, such as the daily washing. In fact, tidying is not that different from any other form of cleansing.45
Tidying is cleaning, it means detaching oneself from an outer layer, and this is for the benefit of man. From a “higher” point of view, it is better not to meet the immediate satisfaction of emotional needs. Instead of defining the house(hold) as a nurturing, warm and motherly space, Taut’s discourse constructed it as a “cold” space in which purity, hygiene and rationality are key notions. During the Weimar period the domestic domain thus became part of an objective culture in which the emotional and the subjective were disciplined in function of the striving towards modernity and social progress.46

Taut clearly struggled with the place of women in this “objectification” of domestic space. In stating that women could not be convinced to separate themselves from the so-called beauty of the fully covered, cladded walls, in stating that they “spin themselves in in their own house like the butterfly spins itself in in her cocoon”47 he clearly associated women with the “old” dwelling culture that had to be left behind. Not surprisingly, then, his whole discourse can be read as a plea to persuade women of the necessity and the beauty of the new house. Taut, however, was well aware that
loosening, or rather redefining, the ties between woman and house rendered her identity ambivalent. When (male) architects defined the “good” ways of inhabiting a house, this meant that they were depriving woman from the agency she derived from her position of authority in the house. He explicitly stated that although it might seem as if the house was appropriated by a “male” architectural culture in which social and rational arguments prevailed upon “the longing of women to create a warm and friendly nest,” this was a false impression. For Taut was convinced that women’s femininity – which he, for that matter, reduces to maternity – was “abused” in the bourgeois house: “After she was brought into sleep the child that was lying at her breast was taken away and has been replaced by a little ape [an imitator].” The “false child” that had been laid at her breast was profusion, the desire to fill the house with objects. Women were misled by the false arguments of capitalists and industrialists. Just like a meaningless superfluity was imposed on the house, a false femininity was imposed upon women. Whereas, however, Taut aptly unraveled bourgeois notions of domesticity and femininity as false male constructions, his own version of the reform of domestic space and the emancipation of women was once more constructed in and on male terms.

**Inhabiting ideal spaces: the instability of the cool–warm opposition**

Recent authors point out that from the point of view of the emotional and everyday reality of ordinary people, the ideal of modern living is experienced as “cold” and “naked,” as uninhabitable. People tend to inhabit the world (and architecture) through the building of intimate spheres (Peter Sloterdijk), through clothing (Judy Attfield), or through the personalization of space by all kind of objects (Clare Cooper Marcus). They tend to produce a personal fabric which evokes feelings of interiority and which is representational at the same time. Clothing or dressing thus acts as the mediation between interiority and exteriority, between individual and social identity. Throughout the history of modern architecture this issue has formed a zone of conflict, or negotiation, between architects and inhabitants. On the one hand, the avant-garde discourse justly blamed the cozy interior for its neglect of all critical and political issues in favor of a hedonist individualism; on the other hand, the disciplinary impact, even violence, hidden in this discourse cannot be denied. The mobilization of people in the context of modern, progressive ideals such as social equality or rational attitudes inevitably meant, as Behne stated, “wrenching” them out of their coziness.

The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk highlights how a heroic attitude and the idea of mobility are implicit in the idea of progress, which lies at the heart of modernist thinking:
The thought of the modern period, which for such a long time has presented itself under the naive name of “Enlightenment” and the even more naive “Progress”, is distinguished by an essential mobility: every time it responds to its typical “forward”, it causes the breakthrough of intellect from the holes of human illusion and enters the non-human outside world.52

Coziness (Gemütlichkeit) indeed seems to embody “the holes of human illusion” from which the intellect has to break out in order to travel toward an “extra-human” world, to travel toward exteriority. Moreover, as Sloterdijk states, the heroic position’s preference for intellectual and existential sharpness goes hand-in-hand with a disdain for the “parochial sphere of living” for “the vague humble-matriarchal space, in which people preferably, and in most cases as seekers of security, as good-natured residents of normality and as inhabitants of their institutions of satisfaction, have settled down.”53 Whereas in Benjamin’s discourse it is the nineteenth-century city dweller who inhabits this matriarchal space, in Taut’s discourse it is woman with her longing to create “a warm and friendly nest” who settles down in contentment.

Helmut Lethen reads in Cool Conduct (1994) the position of the Weimar avant-garde in similar terms as Peter Sloterdijk.54 This avant-garde, he argues, displays a distinctive coolness that distinguishes it off from “warm zones” in culture. This has to do with a reaction against a reality in which modernity unfolds itself in violent ways. After the traumatic capitulation in 1918 that implied the loss of all authorative systems, “people experience[d] the immediate confrontation with modernity as a freezing shock.”55 Weimar culture saw traditional structures dissolving in chaos, in economical and political instability. According to Lethen, the remarkable cult of coolness among Weimar intellectuals, “the disciplining of affects, the desire for transparency, the law of discretion”56 can be read as a “heroic compensation” for “the birth trauma arising from the sudden loss of symbiotic community.”57

Authors of the Weimar period itself stated similar. Max Brod, for instance, wrote in 1929 in an essay on women and the new objectivity: “Recent literature has recently taken on an increasingly hard, cold, masculine tone. Exactly the same as modern music, which sounds antiromantic, antisen- timental. It is unacceptable either to sing or to speak of love.” The reason, according to Max Brod, is quiet simple: “It is incompatible with ‘objectivity’, the supreme postulate of the present.”58 Whereas Lethen sees the tendency towards objectivity as part of an ongoing process of modernization or as a reaction on the shocking loss of community, for Brod it was a reaction to the experience of World War I, which manifests itself as a mistrust of the “experiences of the heart”:
As a result of the war, the younger generation justifiably learned to mistrust everything that partook of passions of the heart. Behind of so much what appeared to be lofty passion, behind the beautiful colors of patriotism, ver sacrum, nationalist and erotic flights, lay nothing but phrases, lay vexation worse than phrases: the base interest of war profiteers, capitalists conducting politics! It is then understandable that a generation grows up to be disillusioned. [. . .] Once one has experienced such need and the unforgettable degradation of the human creature, then one certainly has the right to regard everything as swindle.59

To Brod, the place that woman and the hearth can occupy in such a culture is rather clear: "In a situation so reduced to elemental defense, love and woman and hearth and soul have in fact no place."60 They are perceived as distractions from the essential goal.

Marianne Weber, member of the League of German Women’s Associations (BDF, de Bund deutscher Frauenvereine) made a similar observation ten years before Brod. It is due to the experience of war, wrote Weber, that men have lost the desire for home and family:

How the years of living rootlessly, homelessly in foxholes and trenches, on the wet and filth, in ghastly spiritual uniformity, how the experience and commission of unspeakable things have stamped the souls of our male compatriots, is difficult to measure. [. . .] But it is clear that the long deprivation of regular work, of the home and its order and cleanliness, of the quit pleasures of life, and, above all, the suspension of family life, are not to be endured without departures from the path of culture. [. . .] One can only hope that the millions of men who had to withstand the years of inconceivable hardships have not lost their desire for it.61

Weber feared that the reintegration of man into home life would be extremely difficult. The traces the war left could only be effaced with great difficulty, and this is why "many women and mothers [. . .] are facing the immediate prospect of continued and hard times."62

What tends to be obscured in all this, however, is that the ideal of social equality which converges with the idea of progress tends to destabilize the polarizations of cold–warm, hard–soft, masculine–feminine. In the writings of Benjamin, Taut, and Behne the cozy interior is not associated with a warm, human atmosphere, but with the cold, petrified sphere of individualism. Behne, for instance, wrote that if people could be convinced to let go of their desire for coziness, the effect would be that the “inflexibility” and
“harshness” of the European would be countered. In the discourses of Taut, Behne, and Benjamin, warm and cold, hard and soft are not absolute oppositions, but rather behave as mobile paradoxes. They believed that the departure from notions such as coziness or the home would lead to a better, a more human, a warmer society, not towards a cold exteriority. Adolf Behne, for instance, wrote that real tenderness and beauty, real love, could be found in the relation that exists between the members of the collective. This “warmth” is not a “lived,” immediate warmth between human beings, but rather an abstract warmth radiated by a pure and higher ideal. Within the new society, human beings would connect to each other through the “whole” – through a super-individual entity – instead of through an immediate personal interaction:

Love will not be so much a love between individuals as a love for the infinite universe of which every being is a tiny part. Because all particles love the whole, they embrace each other in such a way that one defends the other. [. . .] This love however, is not of a sexual sort, and never makes people cruel, but only gentler and more helpful. Glass architecture is going to eliminate all harshness from the Europeans and replace it with tenderness, beauty and candor.63

This ideal, however, is not entirely consistent. As the Dutch philosopher Hans Achterhuis points out in Het rijk van de schaarste (The Realm of Scarcity) (1988), individualism, mechanisms of social differentiation, and unlimited desire for objects are not the opposites of the modern ideal of social equality – they rather develop all together as related features of modern society,64 for in the middle-class society that evolves toward a form of social equality, all hierarchies, miscellaneous groupings, and fixed social relations are dissipated: the individual is exposed, naked and alone, as an isolated member of society in front of other individuals. In a society that has annihilated birth and fortune privileges, everyone can reach the top under their own steam, and hence, a battle of everyone against everyone breaks loose. In a continuous mutual competition man desires what the other desires – a notion Achterhuis in imitation of Girard calls mimetic desire – and every involvement in common interest is lost. The equal citizens, so he writes, end up in a hedonistic treadmill and all commodities become potentially scarce. In this way, scarcity becomes a self-evident anthropological base for modern society and unlimited desire becomes an essential feature of modern personality.65 In these circumstances the introduction of complete social equality and the creation of a society of abundance would only be possible via a totalitarian intervention that would put an end to individualism and mimetic desire.
Negotiating extremes: Georg Simmel’s reading of sociability

In the writings of Benjamin, Taut, and Behne a polarized concept of man and society is at stake, coupled with distinct ways of “dwelling”: on the one hand, a nineteenth-century individualistic citizen seeking confidence, security, and contentment in an excluding, anti-social culture of coziness; on the other, a twentieth-century proletarian man, a politically involved and social entity, liberated from desire and dissatisfaction, and inhabiting not a home, but rather the abstract, open space of the collective. What – on a discursive level – has been erased in this open space, along with the aspect of privacy and subjectivity, are the intermediate zones that play an essential part in how individuals inhabit the world: the “clothing,” the home, sociability.

It is interesting to confront this discourse with the thought of the somewhat older German sociologist Georg Simmel. Simmel was the primary intellectual mentor of philosophers such as Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács – which makes him, as Ralph Leck points out, vital for the understanding of Marxist critical theory. Walter Benjamin, moreover, attended his seminars and was profoundly influenced by his thinking. In Simmel’s account, a human being is neither a collective being nor an isolated individual. His position actually oscillates between Marx (radical socialism) and Nietzsche (heroic individualism). The impulse to be sociable, the Geselligkeitstrieb, is, according to Simmel, one of the main human characteristics, next to other impulses such as erotic instincts, business interests, or religious needs. As such, human beings combine the two poles of human existence, the social and the individual, within themselves. At the level of sociological strategies, they tend to combine the tendency towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and change.

Between 1900 and 1917 Georg Simmel developed a “sociology of sociability” (Geselligkeit), which describes sociability in a most catching way as a social form. He saw sociability as the “play-form of association.” Just as playing in its purest manifestation is only about playing, sociability is just about sociability: it has no ulterior motive, no content, and no result. The only source or substance of sociability is the impulse to be sociable. The world of sociability is, according to Simmel, a kind of “ideal” sociological world: notwithstanding the fact that it aims at the satisfaction of an individual need – the need to be sociable – this need cannot be satisfied on an individual basis since it requires a shared and mutual connectivity. The world of sociability is thus the only one where a democracy of equal opportunities without frictions is really operational.

What is at stake in sociability is the immediacy of a direct interaction between people. Since the mood of the mutual relations takes priority above the interests of the people involved, sociability does not offer any room for what differentiates people from one another in terms of objective meanings,
such as being rich, respected, erudite, famous, or exceptionally skilled. Within sociability, the only feature that counts is the individual’s capacity to be sociable. Features, which have their orientation outside the circle, must not interfere. The most personal aspects of life are excluded from sociability too: “It is tactless to bring in personal humor, good or ill, excitement and depression, the light and shadow of one’s inner life.” To ensure that nothing would disturb the purity of the interaction, sociability is based on ignoring the “realities” of everything that is objective, but also of everything that is individually specific. In fact, sociability is about the regulating of distances; it is about developing rules that allow people to experience connectedness without getting too close. In this regulation of distance, tact is the guiding principle.

Simmel observed, however, that although in the sociable gathering people take their distance from all objective interests and features, as well as from their most personal and subjective emotions, they are nevertheless convinced that, in their role as “sociable creatures,” they manifest themselves in their “true humanity.” In the sociable gathering, human beings believe that they return to a kind of “natural-personal” state of being, overlooking the fact that they are not present in their very specificity. Sociability, in fact, evokes the idea that one can throw away all ballast of formality and objectivity. In the reverse sense, according to Simmel, this understanding implies that modern life, with its objectivity, appears as ballast, and that it is considered as affecting “the state of purity.”

Benjamin’s understanding of the nineteenth-century citizen as an egoistic individual who, in his cozy interior hides away from an objective and social reality, resembles at many levels Simmel’s thinking about sociability. Whereas in Benjamin’s view, the coziness of the interior aims at shutting out the “realities” of modern life, in the sociable moment a cozy atmosphere is created in which all the hard and unpleasant aspects of the objective, as well as the subjective reality are veiled. Simmel, however, does not understand sociability as merely a withdrawal from reality, but rather sees it as a valuable form of negotiation between the extreme poles of human existence. For Simmel, sociability offers some kind of solution to the great problem of modernity – namely, the tension between individual and social identity, between subjectivity and objectivity. Therefore, Simmel does not understand sociability as a mere flight of life, as just a momentary “lifting of its seriousness,” for sociability takes on a symbolically playing fullness of life and a significance that a superficial rationalism always seeks only in the content. Rationalism, finding no content here, seeks to do away with sociability as empty idleness, as did the savant who asked concerning a work of art, “What does that prove?”
Conclusion: on the home as an intermediate zone in culture

It seems that nowadays the questionable nature of coziness has evaporated. Images of “cocooning” and notions of interiority are predominantly present, not just in advertisements or lifestyle magazines, but even in the discourse of prominent socialist politicians such as the chairman of the Flemish Socialist party, Steve Stevaert, who recently declared that “coziness is the message” and that “socialism will be cozy or it will cease to be.” In these circumstances, the avant-garde critique of coziness as a withdrawal from social and political reality seems utterly relevant. The rejection of coziness remains problematic, however, to the extent that it is a rejection of the practice of home-making, as it was, for instance, in the case of Bruno Taut who reacted not so much against coziness itself, as against the superfluity created by the inhabitants. It seems that in taking such a position, architects deliberately go beyond the field of architecture, intruding and intervening in the practices of inhabitation. In their urge to control even the most uncontrollable aspects of inhabitation, they ultimately do away with the idea of the home as the personal atmosphere of the inhabitant.

In his essay “Female Culture” (1911), Simmel presented an interesting analysis of the everyday practices of home making. Whereas Taut and Benjamin understand the bourgeois concept of home as an oppressive power structure and as an immobilizing factor of human existence, according to Simmel the home is a practice through which the different poles of human existence are negotiated. He describes the home as “an intermediate entity, laying between production out of the creative self and the mere reproduction of prescribed forms of activity.” It is a domain of a “secondary originality”: an “achievement which take[s] place within given forms and on the basis of given presuppositions, but which also demonstrate[s] initiative, distinctiveness and creative power.” In other words, it is a semi-productive area, lying between creative production and passive reproduction, between subjective and objective culture. In Simmel’s view, the home is neither a place where people dwell in illusions, nor is it the opposite of modernity; it is not a completely passive nor a fully active place, but rather something in-between. The home constitutes a middle ground in culture, an intermediate zone, and it is, according to Simmel, exactly this quality that determines its place in the social scale of values.

When the home is understood not as a power structure but as a continuous negotiation and resolving of all kinds of contradictions and conflicts, the modernist attack on coziness takes on another meaning. This attack is not about the erasure of the “hard contradictions” of capitalist society, but rather about the annihilation of the middle ground, the negotiating space between buildings and inhabitants, between social and individual identity, between public and private, between objective and subjective culture,
between male and female identities. The new “space” that the modernists were campaigning for is then revealed to be not the neutral realm it is claimed to be, since it is clearly situated closer to one end of these polar dichotomies; it redefines the domestic sphere in objective terms, private identity in public and rational terms, female identity in male terms, and culture as a whole in proletarian terms. Together with the ideal of social equality, a new form of “violence” or “oppression” thus comes into being; in order to construct a space of equality, existing identities, social strategies, and daily practices have to be suppressed. Whether these practices and identities are “false” or “obsolete” (Taut’s argument on bourgeois femininity and superfluity) is not really to the point here, since they form part of the lived reality and the everyday experiences of the people concerned. As is convincingly argued in post-structuralist thinking, it is really hard (not to say impossible) to make the difference between “false” and “real,” or between “clothed” and “naked,” as if such qualities would exist somewhere outside the discourse that is constructing them.

One cannot deny that the ideal of emancipation as it is defined in the discourse of Taut and others implies a form of violence that turns it into an ambivalent matter giving rise to contradictory readings. For instance, as Simmel pointed out, at the time the home was one of the few areas in which women could find self-expression.77 When socialist discourse defined public space as the primary locus for realization of the self, this meant that woman’s emancipation implied the loss of the agency she exercised in the home. With regard to the worker, Taut correctly foresaw that “emotional” and “affective matters,” and the desire for social climbing implied that “in his new house” the worker “cannot become bourgeois fast enough.” As can clearly be derived from the victory of the world of consumption over the ideal of naked dwelling after World War II, and from the obstinacy of romantic images of dwelling up to today, the nineteenth-century world of objects and romance was far less obsolete than Benjamin, Behne, and Taut imagined, and far more difficult to “wrench out” of daily and emotional reality. Moreover, the power they granted architecture to effectuate this goal was based on the rather naive assumption that a transformation of material culture would automatically lead to profound changes in the economic and social structures of everyday life.

The architectural discourse brought to the fore in this chapter is a very radical one. Many other voices did exist next to it, but theirs were less loud and certainly less heroic. In these other perceptions, notions of coziness, individuality, interiority, or intimacy were not necessarily perceived as conflictive with modernity or as the “negative” of modern architecture, but rather as notions that architecture could deal with in a modern way, and foremost as notions belonging to subjective experiences for which architecture can create “space.” As Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici, for instance, wrote in 1929:
Even if lyricism can lose itself in the play of volumes, in the light of day, the interior should still respond to man’s needs, and to the exigencies and needs of individual life, allowing for repose and intimacy. Theory is not sufficient for life and does not answer to all of its requirements [. . .] Architecture is not about constructing beautiful ensembles of lines, but, above all else, about constructing habitations for man.78

Notes

I wish to thank Hilde Heynen, Lieven De Cauter, and André Loeckx for their elaborate comments on earlier versions of this text.


2 Ibid.

3 One of the difficulties in addressing this issue is the untranslatability of the words involved. In German the words “gemütlich” and “gesellig” apply, in Dutch “gezellig,” in French “intime,” “comfortable” and “agreeable,” in English “cozy” and “comfortable.” In doing the research for this article, it was found that the translation in the published sources is only seldom consistent and that the meaning of terms is highly unstable. In the translation of Adolf Behne’s Die Wiederkehr der Kunst the German word gemütlich is, for instance, translated alternately by “coziness” and “comfort.” When comfort is used in this text, it is in its sense of well-being or consolation, which comes close to the meaning of coziness, and not in its meaning of rational convenience.

4 That one can observe this attitude in neo-modernist avant-garde positions until today is the point of departure in Hard/Soft, Cool/Warm. Gender in Design (special issue of the Harvard Design Magazine), Winter/Spring 2002. Moreover, this kind of avant-garde position can be found in cultural and urban theory as well. One can, for instance, refer to Richard Sennet’s critique upon the tyranny of intimacy: Richard Sennet, The Fall of Public Man, New York: W.W. Norton, 1992.


10 They correspond with the double meaning of the Dutch word “gezelligheid,” as can be found in the dictionary Van Dale.


16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.


19 Ibid.


22 Benjamin’s view of coziness contains a Marxist critique on coziness. As Victor Buchli points out in *An Archeology of Socialism* in a Marxist vision, coziness (uiut) in the interior was primarily considered a material denotator of a petit-bourgeois attitude that was only interested in its own well-being and that of its family, that put self-interest before social interests. Coziness was considered a form of “clothing” which conceals the power structures, the contradictions of capitalist bourgeois society. In a similar way, Benjamin sees “the masquerade of styles” in the interior as a result of the fact that across the nineteenth century, relations of dominance became obscured. See Victor Buchli, *An Archeology of Socialism*, p. 57, and Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 218.


25 Ibid.


29 *Die neue Wohnung* was largely distributed. It went through five printings between 1924 and 1928, reaching a circulation of 26,000 copies by that time. Bruno Taut, *Die neue Wohnung. Die Frau als Schöpferin* (The New Dwelling. The Woman as Creator), Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1925 [1924], 3rd edn.

30 Ibid., p. 99.

31 Ibid., p. 10.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., p. 11.

35 Ibid., p. 25.

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37 Taut, Die neue Wohnung, p. 15.

38 Ibid., pp. 74–75.

39 That the activity of tidying and throwing away, the striving towards the “naked,” is closely related to matters of identity is described in a penetrating manner by, for instance, Italo Calvino. In the essay “La poubelle agréée” (The official-dust bin) he describes the ritual of throwing away things (the waste) as a purification ritual that forms the basis of “being”: “The most important thing is that with this daily gesture I underline the necessity to break myself free from a part that once belonged to me, the clothing, the cocoon or the squeezed lemon of life, so that only the essential remains, so that tomorrow I can (without any residue) identify myself completely with that which I am and have.” Italo Calvino, “La poubelle agréée” (1977), in De weg naar San Giovanni (The road to San Giovanni), Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1992, pp. 63–84, pp. 69–70.

40 Taut, Die neue Wohnung, p. 95–96.

41 Ibid., p. 72, Fig. 49.

42 Ibid., p. 10.

43 Ibid., p. 46.

44 Ibid., p. 57.

45 Ibid., p. 34.

46 Susan Henderson writes the following about the reconfiguration of the domestic culture and the private sphere during the Weimar period: “[T]his most subjective and personalized domain was rethought as an objective, technological problem.” Moreover, she understands this tendency towards objectivity in dwelling culture as “the erosion of a tradition of female practice in favor of the scientific and modern”. Susan R. Henderson, “A Revolution in the Woman’s Sphere: Grete Lihotzky and the Frankfurt Kitchen,” in Debra Coleman, Elizabeth Danze, and Carol Henderson (eds), Architecture and Feminism, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996, pp. 221–253, pp. 230–231.

47 Taut, Die neue Wohnung, p. 60.

48 Ibid., p. 58–59.

49 With regard to this issue however, we ought to keep in mind as well that Taut directs himself towards to the working class. As the ideal of female domesticity and of a superfluous interior decoration as expression of coziness and homeliness is part of bourgeois culture Taut’s most important aim might be to prevent the feminization of the worker’s house as part of a process of social climbing.


52 Peter Sloterdijk, Sferen (Spheres), p. 17.

53 Ibid., p. 72.

55 Ibid., p. ix.
56 Ibid., p. 130.
57 Ibid., p. 47.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
65 Achterhuis, Het rijk van de schaarste, p. 33.
66 Simmel is known in urban theory foremost for his essay Die Große Städte und das Geistesleben (The Metropolis and Mental Life) (1903). In this classical text he makes the observation that it is a natural reaction of the individual to withdraw in an intellectual and objective attitude to deal with a modern reality that forces itself in an increasingly intense and chaotic way upon the individual being.
71 Ibid., p. 133.
72 Ibid., p. 129.
74 Simmel, “Female Culture,” p. 67.
75 Ibid., p. 68.
76 Ibid., p. 97.
77 Ibid., p. 90.
Chapter 8

The uncanny architect

Fears of lesbian builders and deviant homes in modern Germany

Despina Stratigakos

In a 1932 novel by Johanna Böhm, Das Haus der alleinstehenden Frauen (The House of Single Women), the familiar association of women with domesticity goes terribly wrong.1 The protagonist is a lesbian architect who builds a home for single, independent women with disastrous consequences. Lonely, bitter residents are driven to suicide, madness, murder, and into each others’ arms in what the author portrays as an uncanny house of horrors.

This chapter explores the appearance of an architectural bogeyman in German writings of the early twentieth century: the woman architect as lesbian. She provokes dread by queering architectural ideals, alienating the comfort in what is “known of old and long familiar.”2 Drawing on a range of texts, from sexual theory to architectural criticism and popular literature, I examine how this specter haunts discussions of good architects and good buildings. I begin with the writings of a zealous defender of male privilege at the turn of the century, turn briefly to the reception of women’s architecture before World War I, and conclude with Böhm’s fictionalized version of debates about deviant homes in the last years of the Weimar Republic.
Karl Scheffler feared for the modern architect. In 1907, this popular and influential architectural critic published a treatise examining the ideal nature of the architect and his contemporary degradation by economic, political, and social forces. The corruptors – a long list ranging from greedy capitalists and uncultivated masses to the bureaucratic state – profaned not only the architect, but architecture as well.³

The following year, Scheffler identified a new enemy: emancipated women. In his book Die Frau und die Kunst (Woman and Art), he defended the inequality of the sexes in the realm of artistic creativity. The liberal notion of egalitarianism, he contended, was one of those intellectual trends that “act like contagious diseases and do not disappear until all members of the social body are infected . . .” Under its influence, women gainsaid the sexual differences that denied them artistic genius to claim equal ability as artists and architects. Those who contradicted nature and recklessly pursued artistic productivity paid the price with their femininity. They became “irritable hermaphroditic creatures” who might suffer from a hypertrophy of the sex drive, leading to prostitution, or, more often, from lesbianism, which he warned was “terribly rife” among women artists of his day. Beyond the personal and social costs of such deviancy, the arts themselves were put at risk. “Woman,” he declared, “must stay very far away from architecture.”⁴

Although his attention to architecture was novel, Scheffler was not the first to link women and artistic creativity with sexual aberration. By the turn of the century, female artists, and independent women more generally, were routinely depicted in popular and scholarly literature as lesbians (Figure 8.1). Lesbianism itself was a “new” phenomenon, discovered by medical authorities shortly after the rise of the women’s movement in Western Europe.⁵ The expansion of educational and career opportunities for women in the second half of the nineteenth century gave rise to a generation of New Women who defied traditional expectations of a woman’s biological destiny. Unwilling to credit “true” women with these intellectual and professional advances, some German and Austrian sexologists classified emancipated women who transgressed social norms as a race apart. They were considered neither women nor men, but members of an intermediate (i.e. homosexual) category, often labeled a “third sex.” Otto Weininger, in his immensely popular 1903 treatise Sex and Character, which probably inspired Scheffler’s book, went so far as to argue that almost all women, past and present, who were famous for their intellectual and artistic achievements belonged to this species.⁶

Die Frau und die Kunst should be considered within the social, economic, and political contexts that encouraged the sexologists’ theories of degenerate women. At the same time, it must also be read in the more specific context of Scheffler’s writings on the modern architect, a subject that obsessed him in this period. By reading these works together, we see how the
author’s sexual and professional anxieties – expressed in a preoccupation with the transgression of gender norms and the fate of the architect – coalesced in his construction of a masculine architectural ideal.

Returning to the theme of the embattled architect in 1909, Scheffler specified a new requirement for the profession: masculinity. “Our times,” he claimed, “are anxious for men who are at once capable of idea and deed.” The architect pursued “a man’s supreme yearnings” and possessed
“great, masculine qualities.” 8 Rugged, energetic, autocratic, he was “a man of action.” 9 Decades later, these words would be echoed by Howard Roark, Ayn Rand’s macho architect-protagonist, who, distinguishing himself from weaker men, described himself in the highest terms as “the kind of man who can get things done.” 10

The explicit gendering of the architect in Scheffler’s work between 1907 and 1909 coincided with women’s official entry into the profession in Germany. Before 1907, Bavaria was the only German state that allowed women to matriculate in university architectural programs. Among the problems facing the profession, the dangers of integration must have seemed remote. By the end of 1909, however, all remaining states had followed suite. 11 Suddenly, the possibility of women architects loomed large. The shift in Scheffler’s writings exemplifies the masculinization of the builder in this period, as practitioners, critics, government officials, and leaders of professional organizations attempted to defend the field against these newcomers. 12

Yet as Die Frau und die Kunst suggested, this gendered rampart had a potential breach: if manliness were a prerequisite to architectural practice, “normal” women would be excluded, but “hermaphroditic creatures” would not. Even as Scheffler defined the architect’s disposition along gender-specific lines that excluded women, he acknowledged that it was possible for a woman, acting against nature and her best interests, to assume manly artistic attributes. In the process, she necessarily became transgendered, for the woman who created like a man also developed his sexual desires. Alternately, women already “abnormal” in their sexual feelings tended toward masculine creative drives as well. 13

Thus, the modern architect, for whom Scheffler expressed such concern, was threatened not just by any woman, but specifically by the lesbian. If it were true, as Scheffler claimed, that there had never been “an architect of the female sex,” the integration of the field then taking place could be blamed on what he identified as a “third sex.” 14 The lesbian creator allowed him to insist on the manliness of the profession, even as an apparent contradiction – that is, women becoming architects – was taking place. Scheffler’s logic was shared by others who wished to discourage and deny professional integration. An engineer named Karl Drews argued that the overpowering masculinity of technical fields, which required male bodies and minds, trans-gendered “normal” women. To permit women to enter these professions would be to condone the “breed[ing of] a third sex,” behavior that would be both reckless and unchivalrous on the part of men. 15

In the face of such calamity, however, a final defense remained. In Die Frau und die Kunst, Scheffler ridiculed this “third sex” as half-men unable to achieve true masculine genius. In his later depictions of the ideal architect as a rugged and virile man, Scheffler indicated that masculinity in itself was not
enough. This was a job requiring extraordinary men, possessing supremely masculine qualities. By implication, and as made explicit in Ayn Rand’s novel, some men could not clear this high masculinity bar. The discourse on the masculinity of the architect in this period, initiated by the desire to exclude female practitioners, produced an exalted manliness. The example of the mannish woman architect served as much to censure unsuitable men as it did to discourage women from entering the field. Writing in 1911, the architect Otto Bartning transformed the question about women’s capacities as builders into a critique of the “weakness of our contemporary architecture,” arguing that what “our architecture needs to recover is truly not female architects but rather supremely manful men...”

The lesbian architect thus disciplined both male architects, who were compelled to better perform their masculine gender, and emancipated women contemplating entering the field. If the threat of becoming an irritable hermaphrodite did not persuade a woman to “stay very far away from architecture,” the violence of the transgendering process, as depicted by Scheffler, might. For example, he warned that a woman who attempted to seize masculine genius would “rape her inner nature.” She would “dislocate” her sex and “immolate” her original feminine “harmony.” As a result, her sexual feelings would become “diseased” and “morbid,” leading to “impotence.” In addition to the physical and moral damage, he emphasized the futility of such an effort, for the hermaphroditic creator could never be as manly as a real man.

Beyond inducing fear in his readers, one could argue that the violence and anxiety of Scheffler’s prose reveals the writer’s own horror of the lesbian creator. Sigmund Freud’s notion of the uncanny is useful in explicating this claim. In his 1919 essay, “The ‘Uncanny,’” Freud defined the unheimlich as something familiar that arouses dread. For Freud, feelings of the uncanny, and he identified several types, were rooted in the revival of infantile complexes repressed in the psychological development of the child or in the resurgence of previously surmounted “primitive” beliefs. The uncanny double – a mirror self who threatens the boundaries of the ego and “becomes the uncanny harbinger of death” – derived its potency from infantile narcissism. Another uncanny type drew on the fear of castration, and Freud gave as an example E.T.A. Hoffmann’s story about the Sandman’s theft of children’s eyes. Based on these two aspects of ego-disturbance, and Freud investigated others in relation to the uncanny, I believe we can better understand Scheffler’s horror.

It is surely not a coincidence that the figure of the lesbian architect emerges in architectural discourse at the moment when femininity is being forcefully repressed in the conception of the modern architect as a hypermanly man. The lesbian is, I believe, the return of that repressed femininity in a guise that threatens the masculine ideal. The (imagined) manliness of the
lesbian makes her, to use Freud’s types, an uncanny double: by acquiring the skills to build, and the physical and sexual attributes of a man, the lesbian architect holds up a distorted mirror to the ideal of the manly architect. In Freud’s terms, she threatens the ego boundaries of the ideal architect and becomes a harbinger of his (professional) death. She can also be interpreted as a castrating figure, claiming the phallus of architecture for herself. Thus, Scheffler’s insistence on the inauthentic manliness of the lesbian creator can be seen as a desperate attempt to reassert the boundaries of the masculine architect-ego.

A similar effort characterized the response to women’s architecture at the 1914 Werkbund exhibition in Cologne, a massive and broadly publicized event that promoted a new German style to domestic and international audiences. Founded in 1907 by prominent artists, entrepreneurs, and politicians, the German Werkbund sought to restore spiritual integrity and global marketability to the nation’s products through the aesthetic reform of everyday objects. The 1914 exhibition represented the most significant of the group’s many educational efforts as well as tangible proof of its achievements in fostering good design, the exact characteristics of which were much debated within the organization.

Female Werkbund members were conspicuous at Cologne because of their participation with their own pavilion, the Haus der Frau (Figures 8.2 and 8.3). Due to the exhibition’s high visibility, the women’s building received more press attention than any other project by a female architect in Germany during this period. Its reception provides important insights into attitudes towards women’s architecture, particularly within the highly contested terrain of modern design.

Planned by a Berlin architect, Margarete Knüppelholz-Roeser (b. 1886), and outfitted by some of Germany’s leading women artists, the Haus der Frau elicited strong reactions from visitors because of its shockingly plain appearance: shorn of almost all ornament and color, the exterior emerged as a...
series of bold, rectilinear masses. Although pleasing from the point of view of modernist aesthetics, which advocated honest structure and “naked” form – values explicitly gendered as masculine – the apparent lack of feminine “touches,” such as decorative flourishes and cozy spaces, led both supporters and critics to view the pavilion as distinctly masculine in tone.19

The achievement of the Haus der Frau – its materialization of what Scheffler described in another context as the Werkbund’s “new masculine reason” – angered and embarrassed some critics, who insisted on conventionally gendered boundaries of creative productivity.20 Peter Jessen, a founding member of the Werkbund and an influential voice in the design reform movement, advised women to relinquish architecture and devote themselves to traditional pursuits, such as needlework, that suited their gender.21 Others echoed Jessen’s belief that women who attempted to create like men could be poor imitators at best. One particularly harsh reviewer accused the Haus der Frau of performing a sort of architectural drag, donning a false identity and “playing the muscleman.” The seemingly masculine power of the building, however, was mere illusion: the Haus der Frau reflected the virility of its male neighbors, but could emit none of its own.22 If the Haus der Frau suffered from masculine impotence, others found its femininity to be equally barren. A female commentator chastised the designers for fashioning a home environment that was inhospitable to young mothers and children.23

Even more positive responses often expressed a desire for a return to order. While acknowledging a certain level of competency at the Haus der Frau, one reporter complained that women’s artistic contributions were insufficiently distinguished from those of men, and that the organizers had failed to articulate and display female difference.24 Leading Munich designer Hermann Obrist turned this argument around to criticize male lack. In a speech given at the Werkbund conference held during the exhibition, he refuted the apparent
masculinity of the women’s pavilion, claiming that it appeared so only by virtue of the domineering femininity of the halls created by men. For Obrist, as for Bartning, the architectural intervention of women signaled a deficient manliness on the part of their male colleagues. Like the lesbian creator, manly women’s architecture served to discipline men as well as women. By insisting on its transgression and inauthenticity, critics of the women’s pavilion attempted to reassert normative architectural boundaries.

Some two decades later, the emergence of what conservatives viewed as a degenerate style of domestic architecture – the modernist housing settlements then spreading throughout Germany – inspired a Swiss writer to make the connection between the uncanny architect and the uncanny home. Johanna Böhm (1898–1967) was not professionally involved with architecture: she married young and discovered her literary talent in the process of transcribing manuscripts for her journalist husband. The House of Single Women, published in 1932, was the first of many popular novels she wrote for a female audience. In tone and content, the book suggests that, despite her own professional ambitions, Böhm was anti-feminist and archly conservative in her politics. For Böhm, as for Scheffler, the lesbian architect is uncanny, but in different ways. Unlike Scheffler, Böhm does not use the lesbian architect as a foil to the ideal manly architect. Rather, she uses themes of homosexuality and architecture to explore deviant domesticity. The normative picture she thereby paints of sexuality and familial life speaks to the increasing hostility to unorthodox lifestyles (including feminism) in the reactionary political climate of 1930s Europe.

The novel begins with the protagonist, the architect Blanka Wild, refusing a marriage proposal even though the narrator tells us that she has reached the ripe old age of 26. Blanka has absolutely no interest in men or children; she is disgusted by sexual reproduction and only buildings excite her. In German, the name Blanka Wild evokes a barren wilderness as well as something vile and dangerous. The threat that Blanka poses to men is made explicit in the novel’s opening pages: in addition to coolly breaking her suitor’s heart, a man is killed on her construction site due to negligence. When the latter’s widow, heavily pregnant, begs for assistance in supporting her five children, Blanka, repulsed by the woman’s fecundity, acts cruelly. As the narrative unfolds, Blanka will prove to be especially dangerous to women through her creation of the uncanny House of Single Women.

The residence comprises three large buildings. In our first glimpse, the House of Single Women is described as three white horizontal slashes rising in a landscape of bonnet-roofed houses. A play on words suggests that these roofs house married couples, thus distinguishing the architecture of the single women from the homes of normative families. Moreover, the word “Strich,” or slash, is slang for a street prostitute or red-light district, hinting at
the deviant morality of the single women’s architecture. The sexologists’ tendency to associate prostitution with lesbianism further complicates this impression. The next time we see the buildings from afar, they appear as “a row of bared teeth” gleaming in the night sky above a bridge. By employing sexual and dental metaphors, a juxtaposition that will return at a crucial point in the novel, Böhm represents the House of Single Women as an architectural vagina dentata, a site of castrating rather than procreative sexuality.

The image of the House of Single Women – white, narrow forms hovering above and just beyond the congested older town – as well as later references to the unnaturalness of flat roofs and the suitability of the traditional-style house to its soil and inhabitants, demonstrate that Böhm was familiar with contemporary architecture and the debates it provoked. During the Weimar Republic, federal and local governments supported the construction of modernist housing on a vast scale. The new estates were heavily promoted through publications, exhibitions, and films, and Böhm easily could have seen the widely circulated photographs of white apartment blocks, such as at Dammerstock in Karlsruhe (Figure 8.4), that her description of the House of Single Women so vividly recalls. Her studies in art history at the University of Zurich also may have brought her into contact with these projects. Moreover, she would have had the opportunity to see a modernist housing settlement in Zurich, where she lived after 1926. The visually impressive Siedlung Neubühl, located in a hillside suburb of Zurich, opened with public tours in 1931, the year before Böhm’s novel was published.
Opponents of the new architecture accused the modernists of forsaking their national heritage, focusing on the buildings’ flat, “oriental” roofs as the symbol of the alienated German landscape. As in Böhm’s novel, architecture was said to reflect its creators and inhabitants; conservatives such as Paul Schultze-Naumburg, whose writings Böhm seems to have known, demanded German houses for the German folk. By the end of the 1920s, this criticism was receiving a great deal of attention and support, both from within and outside the architectural profession. It was also becoming more virulent in tone. In his 1931 book, Die Brandfackel Moskaus (Moscow’s Torch), the Swiss architect Alexander von Senger charged the modernists with being agents of an international Bolshevist conspiracy to destroy European culture and the Nordic race. To these political and racist critiques, Böhm added a sexual one, implying a link between modernist housing and homosexuality.

The residents of the House of Single Women, with the exception of a few marriageable girls, are a sad conglomeration of aging spinsters, divorcees, and abandoned lovers. Blanka is not only the architect, but also the master of the house, the masculine authority figure – the missing husband – who unites this pathetic group. The women have come in search of an ersatz family home, but are destroyed by the uncanny evil of the place. Increasingly lonely and miserable, they are driven to drink, madness, suicide, and into each others’ arms. In the culminating scene of horror, the sole happy resident of the House of Single Women, a young woman who is about to be married, is murdered by an insanely jealous resident on the night of her engagement party. Interwoven into this narrative of progressive desperation are images of marital homesteads that glow with warm light, the love of serene mothers, and the vitality of cherubic children. Their domestic bliss is as peaceful and wholesome as the spinsters’ mock-family is violent and degenerate. Through these contrasts, and in the murder of the bride-to-be, the House of Single Women is revealed to be the sinister double – the unheimlich – of the true marital home.

Blanka Wild comes to realize this herself as she is transformed over the course of the novel. At the beginning, the protagonist is portrayed as manly in physique and gestures, as well as in her emotions, demeanor, and professional ambitions. To contemporary readers, who were exposed to popular and scientific discourses on sexual typologies through the mass media, Blanka would have been immediately recognizable as a Mannweib, a mannish lesbian. As would be expected, she is hyper-emancipated, scorns heterosexual love, and lacks maternal instinct. And, even more pointedly, she creates and leads an “abnormal” community of women that excludes men, assumes the roles of husband and father, and shares an “inexplicable affinity” with an openly lesbian character. Especially in the context of sexual and gender stereotypes circulating in mainstream sources in the early 1930s, a
period of reactionary advocacy of traditional values, Blanka’s identification as a lesbian is overdetermined.\textsuperscript{40} 

The uprooting of her deviancy thus requires a weighty symbolic act, which occurs on a visit to a female dentist, Gertrud Zuber, who is also an old schoolmate. With graphic violence, Gertrud extracts a long, rotten tooth from Blanka’s mouth.\textsuperscript{41} The forceps used are described as bloody knives. Other details as well as the dreamlike quality of this passage – Blanka is powerfully mesmerized by Gertrud’s eyes, which during the procedure are possessed by a bestial force – recall Freud’s popular book on the interpretation of dreams, in which dreams about the loss of teeth were linked with the penis, sexual repression, and castration anxiety.\textsuperscript{42} Böhm emphasizes the erotic significance of the scene by referring to Gertrud as a wild animal, and by having Blanka witness sexual passion in the dentist’s eyes at the very moment of the tooth’s extraction. In this sexual-dental encounter, again evoking the vagina dentata, Blanka apparently loses that masculine attribute that prevented her from loving men.

Following this dental castration, Blanka grows conscious of her love for a male artist. As the woman in Blanka emerges, the architect weakens, endangering her firm’s solvency, but endowing the protagonist with a feminine soul. In the painful experience of unrequited love, she comprehends the folly of the House of Single Women and the “unnaturalness” of her profession (i.e. female architect instead of mother).\textsuperscript{43} Blanka weighs the sterility of her own body and of the home she has built for single women against the reproductive fertility contained within and represented by the domestic architecture of “normal” families. Regretting the lost opportunity for children of her own, she finds comfort in building an orphanage, becoming a sort of architectural mother.\textsuperscript{44} The orphanage, one notes, has a steep roof.

By employing a lesbian modernist as anti-heroine, Böhm condemned not only the appearance of the new architecture, but also the lifestyles fostered by creators of the modernist housing projects. More than buildings, these settlements represented a new pattern of living.\textsuperscript{45} By restructuring the design of the home, progressive architects aimed to modernize familial relationships. No more, for example, would mother and father gather with their half-dozen children in the large, live-in kitchen (Wohnküche) of the traditional German home. The efficient minimalist apartments designed by modernists destroyed such older spatial habits, and conservatives warned of “the dissolution of our present family life.”\textsuperscript{46}

More importantly, these smaller dwellings – intended for childless couples or small families – manifested in physical form the declining birth rate in Weimar Germany, a phenomenon that worried conservative and right-wing groups, who prophesied the destruction of nation and race, and laid the blame on the selfish, career-oriented New Woman.\textsuperscript{47} She appeared in close
association with modern design and the new domestic lifestyles. On a cover of Das Neue Frankfurt, the magazine created by Ernst May to promote his housing settlements in Frankfurt, the New Woman dominates a cityscape of modernist apartment buildings (Figure 8.5). The relaxed pose of the model evokes the leisured lifestyle that architects, responding to women’s demands, promised housewives through the elimination of drudgery in the rationalized design of the new dwellings. In reality, as the number of married women working for wages increased, greater efficiency in housework made more – not less – labor possible. The short hair and masculinized dress of the New Woman on the magazine cover signaled her modern choices – for greater

8.5 Cover of Das Neue Frankfurt 3, February 1929
financial and personal freedom over large families – while also suggesting, to some contemporary viewers, a confused sexual identity, a “problem” associated with the New Woman since her appearance in the nineteenth century.51

In the House of Single Women and its creator, fears about modernist housing, New Women, and disappearing families coalesce. The spinster’s modernism symbolizes in architectural terms the empty womb that results from her refusal – stated on the very first page of the book – to sacrifice her career, for “I love my work more than children or a family.”52 As she loses her lesbian-New Woman tendencies over the course of the novel, Blanka’s priorities are also “straightened” out – she craves a family, but it may be too late. The book’s moralism locates it firmly within the reactionary literature of the early 1930s, which attacked the New Woman in its advocacy of an excessive and traditional femininity.53 Yet the message also transcends its historical moment, for Böhm continued to mete out this kind of literary discipline in her later books for adolescent girls, a prodigious and commercially successful oeuvre totaling 28 works. As late as the 1960s, she continued to instruct young women, in books with titles such as Katrins Weg in die Ehe (Katrin’s Road to Marriage), on normative gender roles and the penalties of deviance.54

Yet Das Haus der alleinstehenden Frauen, like Scheffler’s work, also serves to discipline men. If Blanka Wild, the headstrong New Woman, is the architect, literally, of her own fate, the same does not hold true for all who live in the House of Single Women. Many of the residents are there not by choice, but because they have been abandoned by men. Although idealized by the spinsters, who long for good men, the male characters of the book are, for the most part, deserters and adulterers. The saddest figure of the novel, who is also the murderess, is driven insane by the injustice of her destiny – to be rejected by her beloved fiancé and left to a life of utter loneliness and destitution. She, together with the other spinster-residents, must fend for themselves in this immoral society. The novel is replete with images of exhausted shopgirls, typists, and other menial pink-collar workers, who are one paycheck away from starvation.

This picture of cruel independence spoke to the deep disappointment experienced by many German women with the results of their emancipation, enshrined in the Weimar Constitution of 1919. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz have discussed how feelings of betrayal contributed to women’s support for right-wing political parties – among them the Nazis – that promised women a blissful domesticity based on “proper” gender roles, much like that imagined by the tired, forsaken shopgirls in the House of Single Women.55 Blanka’s angry realization, voiced in the final pages of the novel, that biological motherhood is greater than art and professional ambition, would have resonated with many of Böhm’s readers. The wording of the architect’s wish for “a family of one’s own” (eine eigene Familie) emphasizes the
otherness of the uncanny home she created in the House of Single Women, as well as her desire for a larger satisfaction (Blanka loves a man named “Mehr,” German for more) than the artistic freedom envisioned by Virginia Woolf in her feminist essay, A Room of One’s Own.\textsuperscript{56}

From twisted professionals to deviant homes, the lesbian architect marks a disturbance in the “natural” architectural order. Surfacing at the beginning of the twentieth century, Scheffler’s fear of the lesbian architect reveals that promoting a hyper-manly ideal in architecture, which promised to exclude unwanted newcomers, produced anxiety about one’s own masculine identity. Published just a year before Hitler seized power, Böhm’s novel employs the lesbian architect as a symbol of all that is unnatural in art and love in a degenerate, too “Wild” society. In these works, homosexuality and architecture are interwoven in the construction of an ideal. Attending to the uncanny architect queers what is “known of old and long familiar,” revealing unexpected connections between architectural and sexual discourses.

Notes
3 Karl Scheffler, Der Architekt (The Architect), Martin Buber, ed., Die Gesellschaft: Sammlung Sozialpsychologischer Monographien (Society: A Collection of Socio-Psychological Monographs), vol. 10, Frankfurt am Main: Rütten & Loening, 1907. Some of these themes were further developed in Karl Scheffler, Moderne Baukunst (Modern Architecture), Leipzig: Julius Zeitler, 1908.
4 Karl Scheffler, Die Frau und die Kunst (Woman and Art), Berlin: Julius Bard, 1908, pp. 6, 39–42, 95, 102, 57.


For a response to Obrist, see Carl Oskar Jatho, “Werkbundgedanken III” (Thoughts on the Werkbund III), Christliche Freiheit, 9 August 1914, p. 513. See also Stratigakos, “Gender, Design and the Werkbund: The ‘Haus der Frau’ at the Cologne Exhibition of 1914,” in Stratigakos, Skirts and Scaffolding, pp. 323–353.


Das Haus der alleinstehenden Frauen, p. 10. “Unter der Haube sein,” to be under the bonnet, means to be married. This association of raised roofs with married couples is reinforced later in Böhm’s book (see p. 134).
28 See, for example, Franz Scheda, *Die lesbische Liebe* (Lesbian Love), vol. 1 of *Die Abarten in Geschlechtsleben* (The Varieties of Sexual Life), Berlin: Schwalbe, 1931, pp. 30–35, 46.

29 *Das Haus der alleinstehenden Frauen*, p. 31.

30 Ibid., pp. 29, 134.


33 Paul Schultze-Naumburg, *Das Gesicht des deutschen Hauses* (The Face of the German House), Munich: Georg D.W. Callwey, 1929. In addition to references to flat roofs and traditional houses (see note 30), Böhm refers to steeply pitched roofs as foreheads, a metaphor in keeping with Schultze-Naumburg’s concept of architectural physiognomy. See *Das Haus der alleinstehenden Frauen*, p. 300.

34 Lane, *Architecture and Politics*, pp. 140–143.

35 The depiction of a Jewish male student as unattractive, sexually aggressive, and insensitive to the natural landscape (i.e. rootless) suggests that Böhm was sympathetic to the racist elements of the Heimatschutz movement. *Das Haus der alleinstehenden Frauen*, pp. 220–221.

36 Ibid., p. 105.

37 Ibid., p. 182.


39 The “inexplicable affinity” exists between Blanka and her friend Charlotte Hauser, who enters a sexually explicit lesbian relationship. *Das Haus der alleinstehenden Frauen*, pp. 13, 46–47.


41 *Das Haus der alleinstehenden Frauen*, pp. 63–66.


43 *Das Haus der alleinstehenden Frauen*, p. 172.

44 Blanka also becomes an adoptive parent. Her friend, Charlotte Hauser (see note 39), adopts an orphan whose life she has saved. Blanka takes them both in, and the three – Blanka as breadwinner, Charlotte as housewife, and their young daughter – form a family. However, the depiction of Konrad Mehr, Blanka’s unrequited love, as the symbolic father of the orphanage (complementing Blanka’s role as its mother) reinforces her new heterosexual identity, as does her wish, expressed at the very end of the book, to become his wife and bear his “real” children. *Das Haus der alleinstehenden Frauen*, pp. 299–303.

Lesbian builders and deviant homes in modern Germany


52 Das Haus der alleinstehenden Frauen, p. 5.


On a terrace in the steep rocky landscape about 50 meters from the Mediterranean Sea you find E.1027, architect Eileen Gray’s house of dense liveliness (Figure 9.1). It is a project that defies simple divisions and proposes another way of living. It is a luxurious project, designed into detail, but built with the ambition to find ideas to be multiplied. Eileen Gray sought “to create an interior atmosphere in harmony with the refinements of the intimate modern life, all by using the resources and the possibilities of current technique.” E.1027 is a house filled with secrets, pockets in walls, sliding passages, and tempting clefts. Gray’s architecture hides and reveals simultaneously. It is out in the open but still closeted. It tells the story of the visually exposed that remains overlooked if you are not familiar with the codes.

This chapter is an attempt to interpret some codes hidden in the heterosexual matrix of architecture. Simultaneously, it raises the question of opposition and transgression of normative orders. Eileen Gray’s building E.1027 is read through queer theory. It is in terms of seeking “leaks” in the boundaries of heteronormative architecture and interpretation that some interesting differences occur with E.1027. I see E.1027 as an architecture of a nonstraight position.

There’s something queer here
The architect and designer Eileen Gray (1878–1976) came from Ireland but lived and practiced in France. Between the years 1926–1929 she designed and built her first entire house – E.1027 in Roquebrune Cap Martin, close to Monaco on the French Riviera.
E.1027 has two floors, named *rez-de-chaussée haute* (upper ground floor, Figure 9.2) and *rez-de-chaussée bas* (lower ground floor, Figure 9.3). Walls, floors and garden, furniture, closets and fittings, screens, windows and textures, names, movements, and colors – all are designed into a detailed composition. Gray’s architecture is an exploration of texture and color, folds and layers, drapes and inexact repetitions. In her architecture there are screens transformed into walls and rugs combined with floors. It is as if she folded the surfaces into spaces, into entire interiors, to a complete building – E.1027. It is a queer architecture of surfaces where a division between interior decoration and building is impossible. It is a carpet that won’t stay put.

The house is entered from above. It guards the privacy of the inhabitants since they had to go through the house to reach the lower floor and the garden terraces. Only one small fraction of the composition, the lemon tree garden and the kitchen, is on the explicitly public side of the building. Apart from the kitchen, there are on the upper ground floor a main living-room with terrace, a hidden chamber with balcony, a proper bathroom, and a separate toilet. On the lower ground floor are the friend’s room, the maid’s room, the gardener’s room, a toilet, a service closet, and, underneath the living-room (which stands on pilotis), a secluded terrace.

All representations I have seen of E.1027 have left me wondering about certain things. There are pockets in the walls that are only hinted at in the drawings. There are differences in floor levels and terraced surfaces that on a plan only show as lines and can be very easily confused with a line...
9.2
Plan of upper ground floor and gardens

9.3
Plan of lower ground floor and gardens
marking a change in materials. A number of corners and viewpoints are absent in the images.4

The building has become surrounded by myths and anecdotes, but I am going to focus on a story that has been little analyzed. Since Gray’s part in the canon of modernist design and architecture has been recognized, she has become a female hostage of sorts and is often promoted when the “absent” women in architecture are to be rescued from the historical dust of oblivion.5

What has been safely disregarded and excluded from interpretations is Gray’s sliding sexuality, her non-heteronormative lifestyle and how these might have an effect on her ways of disturbing the order of things. To think about E.1027 in queer6 terms brings forward the queerness in the building. This does not mean that queerness is some sort of essentialist core, or the only truth; the point is, as Alexander Doty writes about mass culture, that “only hetero-centric/homophobic cultural training prevents everyone from acknowledging this queerness.”7

Lynne Walker writes in the anthology <i>Women’s Places</i>, “In most recently published work on Eileen Gray, her lesbianism and bisexuality have been recognized, but little analyzed. It seems less important what her sexual activities were than to try to explain the role that sexuality played in her life.”8 That in 1902, at the age of 24, she escaped social and sexual conventions, the family in Ireland, marriage and motherhood, and started to move in the circle of lesbians in Paris, who were the leaders of the literary and artistic avant-garde, have implications for the understanding of her production. However, before we proceed, comes my confession: I still have a need for heroines in architecture. And I have a crush on Eileen Gray. This nonconformist architect and designer awakes my desires and dreams, like a triumphant mirror sending sparkles to my own everyday life and professional practice in the male-dominated and heteronormative regime of architecture (Figure 9.4).
La “living-room”

E.1027 can be read from the bed. Gray designed the habitat out of the formula of the “living-room” which would offer all inhabitants a total independency, and permit rest and intimacy. A generous bed makes up the largest piece of furniture in the grande salle, which is the main section of the building that composes half of the upper ground floor. Singled out as a separate volume held by pilotis (while the rest of the rez-de-chaussée haut rests on the rez-de-chaussée bas) and the first space you enter as a guest, it is evident and visible from both inside and outside. This portion of E.1027 shows what the formula of the living-room could mean, and I will hereafter refer to it as the living-room. The living-room can be understood as a development of Gray’s display at XIV Salon des Artistes Décorateurs in 1923 which she named Boudoir de Monte Carlo. The boudoir was proposed by Gray to be a multifunctional space for all aspects of life – pleasure, rest, studies, business meetings, and parties. The generous day-bed was the centerpiece.

Historically, the boudoir is the first domestic space devoted exclusively to female use and can be compared to the male marked study or cabinet. The term “boudoir” has not only feminine connotations but is charged with sexual pleasure and privacy. The term “boudoir” raises a problem since it reinstates women in the body and sensuality part of the traditional dichotomy where men are associated with mind and rationality. In Boudoir de Monte Carlo and the living-room of E.1027, Eileen Gray counteracted and slipped this gendered simplicity into ambiguity. The boudoir in her interpretation became the most public space of the building, as well as the most intimate. There is no spatial opposition between these two categories; in fact, there are no such absolute categories, rather the “Grayian” boudoir supports a multitude of situations. Visitors are greeted and entertained in this space, but one can also settle in. No simple norm decides what kind of space this is. That which is being performed in the space, with the help of the architecture, decides what space it is.

A central term in queer theory is “performativity” – that we become in and through the act. The term underlines how meaning is created in the process of making. Gender or sex are not preconditions; the categories man and woman are not automatic – we are made to become men and women. This does not mean that these categories are voluntary, but are brutally (re)inscribed. The building as an act is ambiguous, open to interpretation, not confined within normative constraints. Gray considered E.1027 as tentative, “a moment in a much larger study.”

Queer theory is a critique of the “heterosexual matrix.” The heterosexual matrix describes an invisible norm which does not appear to be constructed but comes through as “natural” – a norm that defines everyone and everything as heterosexual until proved differently. The norm inscribes
other ways of living with unnaturalness, deviance or invisibility. The heterosexual matrix is a precondition for how we understand our built environment. In other words, buildings participate in the construction of norms, but they seem to be about bricks and mortar – nothing else. In domestic building activity, the heterosexual matrix is often blatantly obvious, despite the fact that “a number of kinship relations exist and persist that do not conform to the nuclear family model.”

Repetition plays a crucial part in the construction of norms and by repetition the norm seems natural, a given truth. Political philosopher Judith Butler underlines “norm acquires its durability through being reinstated time and again. Thus, a norm does not have to be static in order to last; in fact, it cannot be static if it is to last.” By repeating the same principles for homes over and over again, these principles are naturalized. At the same time, an escape route presents itself in the fact that an exact repetition is impossible. The act of building can be a way to develop new realities. In this sense, some architecture, such as E.1027, can be performative; it takes place within a given frame but manages simultaneously to stage something new. The inexact repetition is consciously pushed a step further.

Gray calls the habitation “un organisme vivant.” A person can set the house in motion. No motor powers this living machine – a player/actor is called for. The architecture prescribes a behavior where the body is engaged with the building elements. Walls and screens can slide aside and windows flip into disappearance, the bar can be folded into the wall, tables can be linked, folded and extended, sideboards and drawers pivot – motion is everywhere. The building calls for action, it underlines the performative aspects of all built environment. Gray’s architecture constructs another kind of person; it is body-building. Through the in-built motions the norm for how houses usually work is broken, which helps to make another sociality possible.

Gray’s English term for the spatial quality of E.1027 underlines the performative queerness – it is a living room – and lacks the evident erotic undertone of the boudoir. Meanwhile, the architecture of matter is suggestive; in the innermost corner of the living-room, behind the large bed, is a shower niche, separated only with a screen that does not reach the ceiling. The space is somewhat masked because the screen was painted in the same pale yellow color as the wall behind it. A strip of mirror in the corner of the screen and the other wall enhance the confusion, as the reflection produces an effect of looking beyond the wall. You cannot be seen when you take a shower, but the sound of water pours through the room (Figure 9.5).

Gray’s architecture displays a great attention to the surface, the exposed and the masked. Nineteenth-century architect Gottfried Semper considered architecture as mask and decoration. He even wrote that the artist “in times of high artistic development also masked the material of the
Another important idea in Semper’s thinking is the primary importance of cladding, *Bekleidung*. Semper reversed the hierarchical order where cladding is secondary to structure. He argued that structure is there within the wall, but the importance of the wall is the visible spatial enclosure. Gray was sure of her focus: “The thing constructed has greater importance than the way one has constructed it.” Semper’s idea of space connects to the texture of the enclosing wall. In other words, it is the dress that decides the architecture, not just the clothes-hanger.

The relation between body and architecture is associated with the visible cladding. Walls define bodies in the same fashion as costumes define bodies, or masks operate, from the outside and in. Walls provide a second container, after dress, for the body, but the wrapping also constructs the identity of the inhabitant. To follow queer theory, the self is constituted in the relation with people (an audience, a lover, or a kinship relation) and in interaction with things (a mirror, a chair or a flight of stairs). Material queerness is situated in the surface – that is, in the interrelation between built matter and the active subject.

The living-room floor of E.1027 is tiled in white, except a section in black tiles. The black tiles, as in a folded extension, continue in a rectangle on the whitewashed wall. The bed and a woollen carpet are thicker surfaces placed into this folded composition. A padded surface on the wall mediates
between bed and wall-tiles. Eileen Gray argues that “The architecture itself should be its own decoration.” In her architecture, everything is part of the composition. A removable painting was considered by Gray to be noxious to the overall harmony.

The upper floor terrace is a rim along the house towards the Mediterranean Sea (Figure 9.6). The division between the living-room and the balcony is movable and variable. It consists of an accordion glass wall that can be completely folded aside. The instability of the wall has been further emphasized by the lack of frame or height difference between the balcony and the living-room. It is one continuous floor, clad in the same white tiles.

Gray furnished the exterior. On one of her photographs, in the 1929 winter issue of *L’Architecture Vivante*, “E.1027: Maison en Bord de Mer,” she staged the upholstered transatchair on the marine d’abord carpet in the balcony extension of the now open-air living-room and invited the spectator to take pleasure in the view of Monte Carlo and the sea. Here she also set up a dining table with a cork top (to reduce the noise of the silverware) and an adjustable lamp on a brush carpet. Through the unpredictable outline the balcony-fringe becomes part of the center, and the living-room becomes part of the outside. E.1027 is folded around itself – the interior is wrapped around the exterior. Gray does not only reverse inside and outside, but she also shifts
the meaning of being in or out. The simple division and the connotations of inside and outside are disturbed – queered.

Architect Jennifer Bloomer, among others, has furthered the ongoing discussion concerning the dichotomy of structure and ornament by pointing out how structure has been marked as masculine and ornament as feminine. With this dichotomy, it follows that ornament has been, and still at large, is considered superfluous and structure essential. Bloomer asks us to reflect on the inseparability of the terms; of artefacts both ornamental and structural.\(^\text{20}\) Queer works to destabilize divisive regimes based on binaristic thinking and perception; the thinking that constructs male and female as hierarchical oppositions, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual.

Queer has come to mean dissonance, but as Butler has argued, the term should not be completely defined to remain a critical device to transgress categorization. Nevertheless, to think about queer as dissonance is a way to understand more easily how queer disturbs the clear-cut. The dissonance appears time and again, and messes up the boundaries.

Gray’s name-giving and play with texts are significant. She uses language provocingly, as if to promote other ways of thinking of her designs and spaces. In E.1027 she stenciled texts onto the architecture. Underneath a strikingly phallic lamp that pokes out of the entrance screen she wrote “DEFENSE DE RIRE” (laughing prohibited).\(^\text{21}\) There are two possible entrances, but Gray is helpful; the text borrowed from the language of road signs, “SENS INTERDIT” (forbidden direction), points out the wrong way – that entrance would take you to the intimate parts of the building. The text plays with double meanings, “forbidden feeling,” but if said loud it sounds like the opposite, sans interdit, without prohibition. Gray teases the visitor. “ENTREZ LENTEMENT” (enter slowly), is written on the wall of the proper entrance. She evokes, as Sylvia Lavin observes, “types of movement uncontainable by architectural interiors.”\(^\text{22}\) Meaning is created through such performative acts. Gray’s mixture of techniques, texts on openings and screens, destabilize given rules. It is a strategy to create a distance to the granted, a dissonance.

Another dissonance is on the personal level of the architects involved. If Gray had designed the house for a female lover or entirely for herself, E.1027 could have been set into the realm of a separate homosexual culture. Instead, there was Jean Badovici who was not only a client of Gray, but also an assisting architect and an intimate friend. The term “queer” unsettles this dichotomy of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Even if the building process of E.1027 also includes Badovici, in respect to their separate production, the building can be attributed to Gray.\(^\text{23}\) The construction of the name E.1027 can also be interpreted as a comment on this: E is for Eileen; 10 for the tenth letter in the alphabet, J; 2 for B and 7 for G; one architect framed by the other. He was her protégé and Gray’s generosity towards Badovici is well
recorded. A severe blurring of gendered roles is going on here which defies a simple division into “normal” relations.

In the living-room fold of surfaces Gray also fixed a marine chart of the Caribbean on which she printed “INVITATION AU VOYAGE” in big letters. The normal interpretation of this is that the inhabitant should feel like a tourist and dream of distant places. The building’s marine and boat-like connotations underline this. Its mobile parts give it a kind of nomadic quality which Gray called “le style ‘camping’,”24 but an interpretation does not have to stop there. Gray’s stenciled text is also a reference to Charles Baudelaire’s poem, L’Invitation au voyage, from the 1860s.

Baudelaire wrote some of his poems to lesbians, in which he romanticized their outlaw status and decadence.25 His books were popular in Paris of the 1920s. In L’Invitation au voyage Baudelaire asks his child, his sister, to join him where “tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté, Luxe, calme et volupté,”26 which can be interpreted as a description of the distant Greek island-haven of Lesbos. Gray’s friend, Natalie Barney, and some of her kin shared a utopian desire to establish a lesbian colony there.

The poem had also inspired to a surrealist short film L’Invitation au voyage from 1927, written and directed by Germaine Dulac. Dulac, another woman loving woman, was a central figure in 1920s’ French avant-garde cinema. Film theorist Anneke Smelik writes that Dulac does not stand alone, but is part of a tradition of gay and lesbian film-making within early cinema. She also tells us that Dulac’s films have been read as critiques of heterosexuality.27 Fantasy plays an important role in this tale of a married woman’s night out at a cabaret. Thus, the stenciled text not only invites you to far-away countries, but reminds the spectator of the fantasies of Parisian nightlife.

**Closet**

A spiral staircase runs right through E.1027, but it is only visible from the outside where it shows on the roof terrace. Despite the central position in the house, the stairs are masked behind screens and walls, and cannot be seen when you are inside. To reach the stairs from the main spaces next to it, you have to turn round a corner and open the secret door behind which the interior path to the lower ground floor is hidden. A new guest will be under the impression that they have to go outside to reach the lower floor. The staircase is not treated as a sculptural element in the interior or as a motive in the façade; instead, the beauty in the curve of the spiral concrete, enhanced by the sweeping light from the roof opening, does not reveal itself until the door is found (Figure 9.7).

The masked staircase conceals pockets of closets in its walls, some reached from inside the encasement and others from the surrounding spaces – a kind of double interiority, as well as a double concealment. The
biggest secret of E.1027 is that it offers spaces for secrets, having layers of interiors within its interiors.

The “closet” is an important architectural metaphor that billows out of the heterosexual matrix. You are in the closet when you are hiding your homosexuality and you get out (of the closet) when you state your homosexuality. Several theorists such as literature critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have reflected on the term “closet”. Architecture critic Aaron Betsky attempts in *Queer Space, Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* to regard the closet not only as a metaphor, but also as a material space. Ways of thinking and norms become more obvious when they are visualized through architectural metaphors. They are just as difficult to shift, challenge or tear down as our built environment.

When architect Henry Urbach in his essay “Closets, Clothes, disClosure” compares the metaphoric closet and the material container of clothes, he finds that they are not as different as they might appear. The homosexual closet helps heterosexuality to present itself with certainty in the same manner as the storage space houses things that threaten to soil the room. He stresses that the stability of these arrangements depends on the architectural relation between closet and room. Their interdependency would mean that when their architectural relation is queered, becomes dissonant from the expected, the solid norm also gets destabilized.
Urbach defines the material closet as a kind of wall cavity. It differs significantly from wardrobes, chests, and armoires which are freestanding, mobile objects that encase clothes within the precinct of the room. The closet, beyond but adjacent to the room, is rarely elaborated as an own space. It is set within the wall but said to be “in” the room. In the chambre d’amis (the room of friends) on the lower ground floor of E.1027, you find an elegant built-in closet. It makes up an entire wall, but the wall comes through as a piece of furniture. Gray’s wish was “That the very furniture, by loosing their own individuality, merge with the architectonic ensemble!” The conventional division between interior decoration and building is pointless since this architecture is made up by how they blend together. The furniture turn out to be architecture.

The closet door conventionally gets concealed with the same wallpaper or paint as the surrounding wall; a closet should be accessible but inconspicuous. But, as always, the mask reveals and hides at the same time. A gap between the wall and the door, the door hinges and handle, or the unfinished space in front indicate the space behind. The staircase in E.1027 is also closeted by its door, which is set flush into the wall of the passage next to it. The door has no frame or decor on its planar surface. Furthermore, when the door is fully opened, it becomes part of another wall that closes the passage between the service area of the building and the living-room (Figure 9.8). This door is thus a masking device that by intervention can divide the one building into two separate buildings. When open, the passage is a dense mediator between the more secluded parts of the building (the chamber, the bathroom and the lower ground floor) and the overt living-room. It is as if you move within a wall. When shut, the distinction between private and public is more explicit, as convention, developed during the previous century, would prescribe.

Salon

Before the analysis of E.1027 resumes, I need to make a detour to Paris. During her years as an art student in Paris at the beginning of the 1900s, Gray was escorted by her girlfriend Jessie Gavin. Gavin passed as a man and therefore they could move in public, in places and at times impossible for two “lonely” women. Gray embodied the New Woman: self-assured, professional, with short-cut hair. She had love affairs with both women and men, but lived most of her life with her servant Louise Dany. Such a family constellation counters the norm of the nuclear family, but reinstates class difference.

The New Women of Paris in the early 1900s contested the construct of women as private. They smoked in public, sat around in bars and cafés, and drove cars. Such scenes suggest, in art theorist Griselda Pollock’s words, “the social revolution associated with women’s sustained re-invention of themselves.” Even if they were considered decadent, 50 years earlier
such scenes in Paris would only have signified the women’s prostitutional status. The nineteenth-century model of the respectable domestic woman is the background to why interior decoration became gender-marked as feminine. Architecture historian Penny Sparke writes:

The interior decorator began to occupy a middle ground, maintaining her commitment to the cultural links between domesticity and femininity but operating outside the home in the context of the “masculine”, public sphere of work defined as professional rather than amateur.37

Gray criticizes the avant-garde architects who are interested in the exterior at the expense of the interior architecture: “The exterior architecture seems to have interested the avant-garde architects at the expense of the interior.”38 Her statement has gendered implications, since the exterior had a higher status as it was marked masculine and the avant-garde architects to whom she probably refers were most likely male. She thought that the interior should command the exterior and not be the accidental consequence of the façade.

Eileen Gray was a welcome guest in the salon that Natalie Barney staged in her home on 20 rue Jacob in Paris. In Feminism and Theatre, Sue-Ellen Case writes about the salon as a personal theater and a place where women have been important forces in the shaping of a public discussion.39 The salon takes place in a salon, but it is the event that makes it into a salon. Thus, the salon of matter, “the theater salon,” props and backdrops, and the enactments – dialogs, flirts, readings, portrayals, tableaux vivants – are woven together by the participants’ engagement in a moment in time. It is a performative architecture achieved through bodies and walls, conversations and costumes, furniture and intrigues.

There is a blurred distinction between theater and life as the audience, consisting of friends and acquaintances, were also the actors, and the place for the salon was the house where the salonièrè lived. The salon is part of the public sphere, but takes place in a private space. Case points to the class aspect of the culture of the salon – the women of the salons were privileged – but argues that there might be other oppressions that make the salons into places of disturbance. Barney’s salon was important in the staging of a lesbian lifestyle which counteracted the invisibility of lesbians in everyday life. Homosexuality in France at the time was, if shocking, at least not criminal. Constant writes:

Gray remained discreet about her relationship during the early 1920s with the famous singer Marisa Damia (pseudonym of Marie-
Louise Damien). Parisian society would tolerate such unconventional behavior so long as outward forms of decorum were maintained. 

Barney had another attitude: she considered a scandal the best way of getting rid of nuisances. There is a multitude of stories of her publicly staged love encounters, in Bois de Boulogne, at the opera, or in her own garden temple, Temple de l’Amitié. Lesbianism has, as queer theorist Judith Halberstam puts it, “conventionally been associated with the asexual, the hidden, the ‘apparitional’, and the invisible.” There is a heteronormative effort to clean lesbians from sexual activities. When we take the example of Barney who was marked by a kind of hyper-visibility, the disappearing tendency in respect to lesbians comes through as a normative denial. The “indecent” sexual activities are not “less important”; they are at the heart of why same-sex desire was, and still is, provoking – they always nestle within the analysis.

Aaron Betsky, who mainly refers to the cultures of homosexual men, argues that the closet is the fundamental principle for queer space. I think that it is one principle out of many, but not necessarily in every spatial expression of queerness. To insist on the closet limits queer space to a dichotomy of heterosexuality and homosexuality. The act of closeting is a normative way to dismiss queer space to the fringes of normalcy and contain it within the deviant other.

The picture becomes different if the cultures of female same-sex desire are not only added but taken as starting points. Since in Paris of the 1920s women who loved women, such as the poet Gertrud Stein and the interior decorator Elsie de Wolfe, were able to be open, if discreet, to make them and their spaces less visible than they were is an oppressive mistake. They fought, and became role models, for the freedom to appear independently in public and professional life. The central role of this network in refining and redefining the founding principles of modernism has often been overlooked.

To put them in the closet only serves homophobia. This explicit lesbian culture was much more at the center of mainstream culture than normally is recognized by historiography. In the 1920s, Gray was among the leading designers in France and did not at all play the marginalized part later ascribed to her.

It is correct, of course, to think about the closet also with regard to lesbians, but it seems just as important to relate the spaces of this group to the life in privacy ordained to all women by nineteenth-century ideology. It was maybe not an entirely homosexual network of women, but definitely a female homosocial environment that much shaped the domesticity of modernity. Sparke observes that de Wolfe had an “overwhelmingly female” network of friends, supporters, and clients: “While her homosexuality undoubtedly brought her into close contact and friendships with a number of women
[. . .] it was her ‘homosociality’ that was more significant in bringing her professional projects.”46 De Wolfe’s strategy was a mutual admiration between architect and client in which the creative project became a reciprocal confirmation. Indeed, it might not be possible to make a clear distinction between homosexuality and homosociality.47

This was the context in which Gray could establish herself as a designer and producer of lacquer works and carpets. In 1921, she opened the interior design shop Jean Désert—her masculine pseudonym—from which she sold her designs for furniture, carpets, lamps, and mirrors. Since the start, Jean Désert had a group of supporting customers in her network of women who loved women. For instance, the painter Romaine Brooks, Natalie Barney’s lover, and the proprietor of the English bookstore Shakespeare and Company, Sylvia Beach.48 Elizabeth de Gramont, one of the most frequent guests at Barney’s salons, was the first person in France to write about Gray’s work in 1922.49

Women are often constrained to create a room of their own within a structure built by men. The interesting thing about both Barney’s salon and Gray’s house is that they do not stay within the limits, but rework the very border of the fixed place. Barney’s salon was a “queer space,” both in the performative sense and in the physical architecture, since it created a dissonance in the spaces of heteronormativity. Her salon was not disguised in the sense of being hidden, but was extravagantly masked within the dominant culture. The theater of the salon and the strategies of E.1027 resist the simplistic division of private and public. Not only do they reverse the hierarchical order between the feminine marked inside “the private” and the masculine marked outside “the public,” but they also make them slide.

**Boudoir**

There is a doubling of the boudoir theme on the upper ground floor of E.1027—the living-room and the “boudoir-studio.”50 The former provokingly exposed, with the big bed as a centerpiece, a place to entertain guests, and the latter closeted, being well-hidden from the living-room by a screen and an overlapping wall which contains a foldable bar. Just like the extrovert living-room, the hidden chamber also performs as a multifunctional “Grayian” boudoir, complete with an extravagant bed that emerges from the wall dressed in fur and colored drapes that, even when drawn back, would keep it elegant, a studio portion arranged with a writing table, diffused light and an intricate filing cabinet; and behind the shimmering aluminum-clad “coiffeuse,” a slim screen-like cabinet, running water, a washbowl, and a fold-out mirror with a satellite tray for “CHOSES LÉGÈRES” (light things). Unlike the extrovert living-room, however, the chamber is hidden away within the body of the building.

A private balcony with a summer bed supplies the chamber with an exterior hideaway—protected by the corner of the building and out-of-sight
from the long balcony of the seaside. Behind the bedroom is another place to wash yourself – a proper bathroom well separated into its own distinct space of the greatest privacy in this sequence of closeted spaces. A small exterior stairway makes it possible to exit into the lower gardens; despite the closeness of the bathroom, its independence is assured.

Gray made a great effort to moderate the visibility of the chamber and its adjacent spaces so their presence did not seek the attention of the guests in the overt living-room. The narrow passage to the disguised spaces is a recess of the living-room. To get to the chamber, guests must go into the wings around corners. When displayed, the bar Gray fitted into the walls of the passage masks the possible spatial link even more. Nonetheless, the passage-niche can also be viewed as a stage with the bar as part of the scene. Attention is thus attracted to what might be slumbering behind. The one who wants to see will see. We can compare this to the “invisible” lesbian: two women holding hands might not just be friends, the one who knows the codes will wonder if they are lovers.

There are three alternative ways out from this interior hidden within an interior: through the bathroom, the living-room, and the balcony. Additionally, Gray hid the exits from within the chamber. “Thanks to the dis-position of this room (by overlapping) the doors are invisible from the inside.”51 The possibility both to reach the chamber and leave without being seen evokes games of hide-and-seek, secret love affairs, and safe escape routes. Despite the extreme interiority of the chamber, there is no sense of being confined. In fact, all the spaces in the building, except the maid’s room, have several possible links, as well as a direct connection to the garden. The links between the rooms can be seen as built-in codes for movement. You never enter directly into a room, but always move around corners. As Sylvia Lavin observes, “E.1027 is, in fact, riddled with what might be called secret pas-sages, hidden escape routes that have little to do with conventional windows and doors.”52 Doors and windows are normally privileged architectural ele-ments. In Gray’s architecture, the doors are hidden and windows are subordinated to ventilation or made to disappear.

Curtain

E.1027 can be understood as a performative challenge to the heterosexual matrix. It is clearly recognizable as a house to live in; simultaneously, it does not conform to the nuclear family. You live in another fashion here; the building is sexually charged and ambiguous. E.1027 seems, in Sylvia Lavin’s words, “to offer access to a life outside the rules of civilized behavior and conventional architecture.”53 If architecture aggravates cultural norms, there is much to be learned from such an instance of subversion. In my opinion, Gray’s house offers a built suggestion for a nonstraight lifestyle.
Gray sought to build out of sensibility, but “a sensibility clarified by knowledge; enriched by ideas.” She opposed, through the search for complexity and nuances, a simplistic architecture of oppositions, the division between thought and body, surface and structure, the beautiful and the practical. Gray did not see the pleasure of the eye as opposed to the well-being and comfort of the building’s inhabitants. E.1027, depending on the cultural context, can be understood as a feminist critique of the culture of architecture, a culture that has a dubious relation to (homo)sexuality and maintains a mainstream normative masculinist taste.

Notes
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1 My translation of “à créer une atmosphère intérieure en harmonie avec les raffinements de la vie intime moderne, tout en utilisant les ressources et les possibilités de la technique courante” (my emphasis). Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici, L’Architecture Vivante, no. 26, 1929, p. 23.

2 Film- and mass-culture theorist Alexander Doty uses the terms “queer” and “queerness” as “a range of nonstraight expression in, or in response to, mass culture. This range includes specifically gay, lesbian, and bisexual expressions; but it also includes all other potential (and potentially unclassifiable) nonstraight positions.” Doty, Making Things Perfectly Queer. Interpreting Mass Culture, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. xvi.


4 Some of these uncertainties were answered on a site visit October 17, 2003, even though the building looks very different from its heyday. E.1027 has been abandoned and left to decay, but fortunately Christine Coulet from the Municipality of Roquebrune-Cap Martin, the owner of E.1027, informed me that it will be restored, with all the details, colors, and furniture of 1929 – the year when Gray considered E.1027 completed – and opened for visitors.

5 Many know E.1027 not because of its norm-bending architecture, but as the building that Le Corbusier was obsessed with. Architecture historian Beatriz Colomina has written about Le Corbusier’s desire for E.1027 and Eileen Gray in “Battle Lines: E.1027,” Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Kanes Weisman, eds, The Sex of Architecture, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996, pp. 167–182. Le Corbusier tightly framed the previously solitary E.1027 when he built on the adjacent site. He also marked the very walls of E.1027 with a number of murals. Even if this story is important, it victimizes Gray and the attention is pulled away from her architecture to the dominant male architect. This standpoint is further argued by architecture historian Sylvia Lavin in “Colomina’s Web: Reply to Beatriz Colomina,” The Sex of Architecture, pp. 183–190.
6 “Queer” in the meaning deviant from the expected or normal has been used earlier as an offensive slang term for an openly homosexual person. For decades, “queer” was used solely as a derogatory adjective for gays and lesbians, but in the 1990s the term has been semantically reclaimed by gay and lesbian activists as a term of self-identification. The word is used as a term of defiant pride to overcome limiting identities.

7 Doty, Making Things Perfectly Queer, p. xi.


9 Measuring 6.30 x 14 meters, the living room is the largest interior of E.1027.

10 For further discussion on the idea of the boudoir in modernism see Chapter 16, “The Modernist Boudoir and the Erotics of Space” in this volume.


14 Ibid., p. 37.

15 Gray and Badovici, “Description,” p. 28.


17 My translation of “La chose construite a plus d’importance que la manière dont on la construit,” Gray and Badovici, “Description”, p. 23.


19 Gray and Badovici, L’Architecture Vivante, poster 37 (the carpet, in color, is also presented on poster 50) and p. 39.


21 This interpretation was given to me on my visit to E.1027 by Christine Coulet who had this from Renaud Barrès, the local architect involved in the restoration of E.1027.


23 Walker discusses the problem that, in a collaboration between a man and a woman, the building often gets attributed to the man. “Cultural assumptions about women’s auxiliary role and subservient nature take over.” Walker, “Architecture and Reputation,” 2003, p. 100.


26 “All is order and beauty, luxury, calm, and delight” (Cat Nilan, trans.). Charles Baudelaire, Paris Spleen, 1869.


32 Adam, *Eileen Gray*, p. 34.
34 As Dolores Hayden and Griselda Pollock, among others, have revealed, the respectable woman during the nineteenth century is construed as private. The female domain became the interior, where she was part of the decor to mirror male property. The honorable man was active in public life, while a “public woman” was the term for women who sold sexual services. See, for instance, Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories*, Routledge: London and New York, 1999, p. 179.
36 Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, p. 179.
45 Sparke, “Elsie de Wolfe”, p. 49.
46 Ibid., p. 50.
47 Compare with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s thoughts about male bonding: “The importance of the category ‘homosexual’ comes not necessarily from its regulatory relation to a nascent or already-constituted minority of homosexual people or desires, but from its potential for giving whoever wields it a structuring definitional leverage over the whole range of male bonds that shape the social constitution.” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, p. 86.
50 Gray and Badovici, “Description,” p. 31.
51 My translation of “Grâce à la disposition de cette chambre (par désaxement) les portes sont invisible de l’intérieur,” ibid.
53 Ibid.
Chapter 10

An architecture of twenty words
Intimate details of a London blue plaque house

Lilian Chee

On a warm spring afternoon, I retraced Sylvia Plath’s route from the zoo in London’s Regent’s Park to her home in the North London suburb of Primrose Hill. Passing playing children, mothers with prams, nannies with their charges, young women hurrying home with bags of groceries, I felt like an intruder stumbling into the perfect domestic theatre of Primrose Hill’s Chalcot Square. The square is surrounded by late nineteenth-century terrace houses, cheerfully painted in pastel colours. Number 3’s façade is an all-too-sweet lilac that discreetly holds a circular ceramic blue plaque announcing (Figure 10.1):

Sylvia Plath
1932–1963
Poet
lived here 1960–1961

On the second floor, in a tiny one-bedroom flat, celebrated American poet Sylvia Plath and her English husband Ted Hughes made their first London home. Here, shortly after the birth of her first child, Plath began to write a
semi-fictional, feminist autobiography, *The Bell Jar*, under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, laying bare the despair, loneliness, and vulnerability of a 1950s’ woman. Here also, she strove to become the perfect wife and muse to a husband who would with her, “romp through words together.”

Minutes away, around the corner of this green square at 23 Fitzroy Road, there is another house with another blue plaque commemorating Irish poet and dramatist W.B. Yeats. In Yeats’ house, Plath overdosed on sleeping pills, lay her head on a towel in a gas oven and took her own life after a cold winter in February 1963. Plath’s name on the façade of number 3 serves as a primal signifier for her poetic genius. It also points, albeit obliquely, to what is now the mythic scene of the crime – the mute, unmarked *other* house at
number 23 where Plath met her end. The public’s interest in Plath extends beyond the literary into her biographical details. Her houses and their blue plaques have become part of Plath’s fascinating biographical paraphernalia.

The London blue plaque scheme was started by the Society of Arts in 1867 to mark the residences of celebrated figures and to raise public consciousness “about the architecture that was prevalent in a person’s time and the background against which that person lived.”² There are, to date, over 750 blue plaque houses in the capital, with approximately 10 percent of these once occupied by notable women.³ The inscription is usually limited to 20 words. It weaves an intimate web between occupant and house – a relationship that escapes normative historical methods of exploring modern architectural domesticity. If the house is seen as structural, as an object legitimately called architecture, then the plaque is an excessive supplement that refuses to free this object(ive) architecture from the subjective life of its occupant.

The blue plaque constructs architectural meaning performatively by announcing the primacy of the occupant’s life in the history of the house – for example, Plath or Yeats – over architectural form, style, typology, or scale. Further, by performatively overwriting the temporal classification of a Victorian house with the duration of Plath’s twentieth-century occupancy, the temporal narrative associated with an architectural history of style is also challenged by the plaque. In Plath’s blue plaque house, the power to create architectural meaning is shifted not just from the architect to Plath as occupant, but is dissipated to each visitor who encounters the house through the plaque’s inscription.

I propose that an intimate method of reading Plath and her domestic environment might help to construct a fuller architectural knowledge of these houses. Intimacy gives a different kind of criticality to architectural methodology. It destabilizes the authority of knowledge premised solely on architectural intentions. By this I mean that the analysis of the blue plaque house based on architectural drawings, the architectural history of the house, the background/intentions of the designer, and the analysis of the building alone are no longer adequate to communicate the experience provoked by the blue plaque. The architectural nature of the blue plaque house, hence, resists conventional architectural analysis and conventional architectural archives. Instead, the biographical details, working methods, and spatial practices of the named occupant become central. These elements come together to generate a new method of reading and a new genre of the architectural detail.

This chapter expands my interpretation of the London blue plaque as a metonymical device of intimacy. We enter the interior of the house not through the masterly reading of a plan, but through the peripheral reading of Plath’s biographical documents and poetry. Through the blue plaque, the
excessive motifs of surface, supplement, and femininity manifest themselves in a biographical architecture of the private house. This intimate method of reading, I propose, exceeds the hermeneutic possibilities of a conventional architectural document. To overread Plath’s houses is to transform these biographical documents into spatial ones.

**Getting under the skin: notes on an intimate method**

We might overread Plath’s text to explore how her writing could operate as a critique of her domestic spatial order and its historical milieu. “As much as she assimilated and invested in certain conventional scripts as the paradigms of her won success, her interpretation of her experience was often a resourceful negotiation of the incompatible possibilities that were embedded in the 1950s ideology of gender.” This interpretation refuses to see Plath as becoming “the horror of which she speaks” or to consume her work as the product of a hysterical woman, since these moves conveniently simplify the anxieties of gender boundaries Plath herself faced as a woman/wife/mother/poet of the 1950s. In return, an architectural analysis of her houses might offer alternative ways of analyzing Plath’s poems, as they were intricately connected to her domestic spaces and experiences.

Plath’s ambivalent commitment to domesticity gave impetus to some of her strongest poetic works. It is through these works that her houses now resonate with meaning. Seeing her work as a revolutionary language act where the semiotic (unconscious desires) ruptures the symbolic (familial, societal) order of late 1950s’ domestic arrangement gives us the possibility of recovering Plath’s struggle to transgress the limitations imposed on her as a woman/wife/mother/poet. Her rebellious voice is also akin to an écriture feminine since it occupies “a place. . . That is not obliged to reproduce the system. . . If there is somewhere else that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction, where it writes itself, where it dreams, where it invents new worlds.” Her writing and spatial practice become central architectural resources and theoretical tools to access her domestic space. So, how do we read Plath’s writing architecturally?

**Overreading: the embodied detail as architectural tactic**

Overreading is a symptom of restlessness with knowledge: it is to read texts, not paradigms. To overread Plath is to refuse reducing her work into a static model of despair. In “Arachnologies: The Woman, The Text, and the Critic,” Nancy K. Miller retells the parable of Arachne’s transformation into a spider, “her head shrinks, her legs become ‘slender fingers’ and virtually all body . . .” Miller overreads the story to recuperate the dissolved body of the spider — the subject lost in the work of the web. Overreading is also an embodied activity, a “poetics attached to gendered bodies.” Miller concludes that
overreading is to read for the signature of the subject, “to put one’s finger –
figuratively – on the place of production that marks the spinner’s attachment to
her web. . . . to refuse and refigure the very opposition of the spider and her
web.”11 To overread Plath allows for the inclusion of her (silenced) voice in the
architectural interpretation of her domestic space. Adapting this literary
concept to architectural analysis, I propose that overreading architecturally is
to overread for the embodied detail marked by the occupant.

The architectural detail holds a paradoxical position. The detail is
intimate, excessive, the surplus of the building. It is “the joint, that is the fertile
detail, is the place where both the construction and the construing of architec-
ture take place.”12 It calls to mind the presence of a “feminine particular,” or a
“feminine form of idealism.”13 The blue plaque is an excessive detail that is
significantly embodied – it encompasses the body of the occupant. Plath
herself overread Yeats’ blue plaque at 23 Fitzroy Road and saw it as a good
omen to reinvent her self, “. . . in the house of a famous poet . . . my work
should be blessed.”14 This tactic of overreading practiced by Plath and by
all who indulge in the blue plaque, puts the house – the primary object of archi-
tecture – at risk by placing it on par with poetry, gossip, suicide, secrets, and
lies. On the façade of 3 Chalcot Square, Plath’s plaque signals the unwieldy
presence of her female body. This feminized house-body overflows the
limits of conventional architectural discourse by implicating the occupant’s
biographical details.

How is the embodied detail written in Plath’s texts? Her descrip-
tions of her houses straddle in-between the literary and the architectural. They
challenge the form and language of detailing in architecture. While they
address issues of scale, texture, material, color, fixing methods, and dimen-
sions, these descriptions do not resemble the constructed joint familiar to
architecture. Her details are embodied and lived: the size of her bedroom too
small to fit their 0.5 square meter bed on which her daughter was born, the
shiny American-sized refrigerator and reconditioned stove that looked out of
place in her shabby kitchen, the patterning of her wallpaper, the red interiors of
3 Chalcot Square, and the blue rooms of 23 Fitzroy Road, the cramped
vestibule that held Hughes’ hulking frame and a rickety card table loaned from
friends, the narrowness of the one-bedroom flat that did not take well to her
excessive pregnant body and the emptiness of her last flat chilled by one of
England’s most bitter winters.

These embodied details are dispersed in various archives, often
peripheral to architectural knowledge. To place Plath’s embodied details in rela-
tion to her houses is to make an intimate spatial connection akin to the
spatialization of feminine writing, a connection that is “not obliged to repro-
duce the system.” This placement considers Plath’s embodied position central
to our understanding of her houses.
Paper houses: an intimate strategy for overreading

Plath’s London houses

Plath had an obsessive relationship with the surface of paper. Her writing practice constituted a kind of overreading – she overread the surface of her writing not as a blank page but as one already invested with symbolic significance. At the Smith College Rare Book Room where the Sylvia Plath Collection is kept, her “textual body is also hopelessly entangled” with Hughes since the bulk of her final poems were written on the back of Hughes’ and her own recycled manuscripts and typescripts. On one side of the paper, her words have bled into Hughes’ while engaged in a “back talking” with his work. She used paper as an analytical image to speak of her complex place – the position of a 1950s’ woman – at the seams of domesticity. In her poetry, the perceived thinness, uniformity, blandness, and sterility of paper represented the environment of such a woman who could either be an infertile career woman or a mindless housewife, but rarely both at once – “Perfection is terrible/ it cannot have children.”

Our experience of Plath’s blue plaque house is also restricted to its surface. The plaques (50 mm thick, 459 mm in diameter) are set flushed into the fabric of the houses’ public façade and positioned so that they can be read from the public thoroughfare. Yet the house remains part of the street, part of the neighborhood, part of its ordinariness. The house is also inhabited by its present occupant whose semi-public space we, as curious viewers of the plaque, constantly intersect. The blue plaque forces a surface reading of architecture that is palimpsestic – the house as a relational entity – connected to its past and present occupancies, and linked to its site. Coinciding with the palimpsestic practice of Plath’s writing, this relational reading of the house develops an alternative to the more masculine set of values defining modern subjectivity: “the idea of ‘a self that is not closed off, separated from social relations that shape it . . . [that] does not have to imagine itself ‘leaving home’ to become a self’ which might be of more relevance to women.”

Even if women’s expectations in the 1950s were restricted predominantly to the “housewife–mother” mode, Plath ambiguously defined herself as a “triple-threat woman” from within the space of her home. It is thus, from the surfaces of Plath’s art and her “viciousness in the kitchen,” that we, as observers, might relate to the surfaces of her two North London blue plaque houses.

A paper foundation: the English Heritage blue plaque archives

When the file I requested on Sylvia Plath’s blue plaque house reaches me at the English Heritage Blue Plaque archives, I am beguiled by its contents. It had evidently been mended on its three edges to carry the weight of bulging paper inserts. Inside this nondescript brown manila card folder I had expected
architectural drawings, a history of the house, information on its architect, and views of its interiors.

Apart from a general description of the house as a Grade 2 listed building from mid to late nineteenth century with some details of its façade features, the folder had very little in the manner of conventional architectural documentation. Instead, there were numerous letters nominating Plath for the scheme. There were newspaper articles on Plath, on Hughes, photocopies from various Plath biographies featuring excerpts describing either 3 Chalcot Square or 23 Fitzroy Road, magazine articles on Plath’s life and speculations about her suicide, pages copied from Plath’s letters to her mother about her house(s) and a photocopy of Plath’s entry in the *The Dictionary of National Biography*. There was a full-sized drawing of the plaque setting out its exact inscription. There were formal correspondences between English Heritage and various parties to facilitate the blue plaque installation. This included the owners of the house, the plaque makers, the installation contractors, the architectural photographers, and the building-control department. There was the steady flow of more newspaper and magazine articles, generated by the presence of Plath’s newly installed blue plaque on July 28, 2000.

In these documents, the house becomes a necessary setting, perhaps the only stable space to locate a Sylvia Plath who continually recedes into the background. Yet it is through Plath and through the labyrinth of text written by and about her that the house has been made significant. In other words, the house is brought into view – it exists as architectural matter – because of the speculative material in the brown manila card folder. Reviewing the file, one asks what constitutes the architecture of Plath’s blue plaque house? What counts for architectural evidence? Does pulp, paper, pulp fiction count? Our identification with Plath’s house by such a tenuous sensibility, through the mass of biographical papers in the English Heritage archives, interestingly stirs up the wobbly foundation of the architectural – what constitutes it, how it forms, when it takes place and who creates it.

**A newly-cut sheet: 3 Chalcot Square**

Number 3 Chalcot Square is one of thirty-odd mid nineteenth-century houses in the square listed by English Heritage for their “group value” of being relatively well preserved. With their neatness and familiarity, they resemble dolls’ houses and suggest a wholesome interior containing “all those other mothers headless at their cooking.” Number 3 is a three-storey town house with basement and dormers, fronted by three large architraved sash windows on the first and second floors. Smartly painted, it boasts a continuous first-floor cornice with centrally bracketed pediment and a Doric prostyle portico. On the rusticated stucco ground-floor bay, next to a three-light window, there is Plath’s blue plaque.
Escaping the fixity of the American super ego with its “bell jar” environment, Plath and Hughes moved to London and took a three-year lease for six guineas a week. The flat came unfurnished with a small bedroom, a kitchen, a living room, and a bathroom. Its cramped interior was compensated by its ready access to a nourishing environment for both writers, being physically close to publishing circles, Soho, and the BBC. Still, Primrose Hill defied this urbanity with its village setting which, for Plath, was an ideal place to start a family—nearby were Regent’s Park, her doctors, the laundromat, shops, and, overlooking Chalcot Square, a quiet green with fence and benches where mothers and children spent idyllic days. But even while she wrote that she never wanted to move from the square’s gentle familiarity, Plath claimed, “I must say that I am not very genteel and I feel that gentility has a stranglehold: the neatness, the wonderful tidiness, which is so evident everywhere in England is perhaps more dangerous than it would appear on the surface.”

Despite being fully pregnant, Plath conformed to the need to housekeep; scrubbing and painting her new flat as meticulously as she committed herself to writing. She immersed herself in “schemes for papering, painting and furnishing her London flat in preparation for the birth of her first baby.” To her mother, Plath sent sketches she made of her new flat’s floor-plan, together with ink-labeled samples of wallpaper for her bedroom (white paper with red and pink roses, and buds and mossy green leaves), and kitchen (cheerfully printed with “old-fashioned bicycles, carriages, carts, passenger balloons, early automobiles, lamp-posts and table lamps”). While she dreaded being a drudge, “refrigerators and wallpaper were of great importance. Domestic arrangements took up a great deal of space in her writing, as they did in her life.” She took seriously to cooking *apfelkuchen* and chicken stew in her tiny shining kitchen and aspired to be the perfect hostess. As much as she was critical of them, Plath indulged in the recommended domestic practices of her day, diligently detailed by women’s magazines such as *The Ladies Home Journal*.

At the same time, she challenged the fixed domestic spaces and routines dictated by the architectural layout of their tiny flat. She and Hughes rearranged the flat to create separate areas in which both of them could write. Hughes worked, at first, in a small vestibule in their hallway on a borrowed card table while Plath used the sitting room. Later, they took turns to work in a borrowed study at St George’s Terrace in writer W.S. Merwin’s house, down the road from their Chalcot Square flat (Plath using the study in the morning and Hughes in the afternoon) and also in the sitting room of their own flat. They devised a timetable when, once a week, each of them would have the luxury of a sleep-in, giving them space to write unencumbered by household chores. Despite the shortage of space and money, Plath invested in the comforts of an American-style refrigerator and a reconditioned stove to counteract what she
perceived as the unacceptable drabness of old-fashioned English kitchens. They also indulged in a bed that was too large for their modest bedroom. The amicable village setting of Primrose Hill had encouraged a steady influx of visitors, but after a period of entertaining, Plath wrote to her mother that she was really going to “put my foot down to visitors now. I get tired easily and like the house to myself so I can cook, read, write or rest as I please . . .”32

Her journals, letters and biographies reveal Plath’s ambiguous response to the wallpaper-perfection of her flat at Chalcot Square. She delighted in housekeeping and decorating, but simultaneously challenged the constraints this domestic space imposed on her ambitions as an aspiring writer. In changing the spatial and temporal order of her cramped flat by inventive use of its spaces and subversion of household routines, Plath was in fact, questioning where the housewife–mother–writer might be positioned. Her insistence on managing wallpaper and writing paper on equal terms, contested boundaries of inside-outside, housework and professional work. Therefore, the blue plaque at Chalcot Square simultaneously celebrates Plath’s occupancy, and points to her ambiguous and composite position in this house.

**Back talking: 23 Fitzroy Road**

Five minutes away from 3 Chalcot Square is Plath’s second and final London home. Number 23 Fitzroy Road is another late nineteenth-century, flat-fronted, three-storey terrace house with basement (Figure 10.2). The house is unlisted. Its rusticated stucco ground floor is topped by two stories of brown brick-faced façade, each floor with two architraved sash windows. Plath occupied a three-bedroom maisonette flat on the top two floors from December 1962 to February 1963, surviving what she called a “snow blitz,”33 one of the coldest winters in England’s history. Unlike Chalcot Square, this house does not have a forecourt and opens directly to the street. The front door is reached by climbing several steps up from the pavement. Apart from another blue plaque placed prominently between a three-light ground-floor window and the front door, the house does not look extraordinary. But Plath found it special when she was looking for a flat to begin afresh in London in late 1962. “By absolute fluke I walked by the street and the house . . . where I’ve always wanted to live . . . And guess what, it is W.B. Yeats’ house – with a blue plaque over the door, saying he lived there!”34

William Butler Yeats 1865–1939
Irish Poet and Dramatist
Lived here

Plath considered her find of Yeats’ Fitzroy Road house a good omen. “Back in Devon, jubilant, full of plans, she consulted Yeats’ *Collected
Plays, hoping for a message from the great poet. Sure enough, when she opened the book at random her finger fell on the passage, ‘Get wine and food to give you strength and courage, and I will get the house ready’ in *The Unicorn from the Stars.*” The architectural significance of this house was performatively constructed by the single announcement that Yeats had lived there. As Plath attested, “I covet it (the flat) beyond belief, with that blue plaque!” After moving in, she wrote her mother saying she felt “Yeats’ spirit blessing me.” It was habitual for Plath to engage in spiritual beliefs and her use of the Ouija board was not uncommon. Despite the respectable propriety of this terrace house in a middle-class neighborhood, Plath had perhaps linked the announcement of Yeats’ occupancy with his legendary delvings into the...
occult – Yeats was initiated into the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in another London flat around 1890. Primrose Hill had also gained an uncanny reputation as a gathering site for summer solstice celebrations. This ambiguity must have intrigued Plath who longed for some form of normalcy in domestic order – she continued to plan detailed menus for daily meals that she herself rarely had appetite for when she moved into Yeats’ house – but simultaneously sought to subvert this order.

In “In Yeats’ House: The Death and Resurrection of Sylvia Plath,” Sandra M. Gilbert observes that this house held symbolic value for Plath. The plaque marked her entry into the premises of a male poet who, “among the male modernists, had the most reverence for female power.” “By dwelling on Yeats’ writing, then, literally dwelling in his house,” this passage symbolically marked Plath’s entry into a male-dominated poetic tradition. It also opened the possibility of putting the domestic on equal footing with the professional. Yeats’ blue plaque performatively changed the status of an ordinary flat-fronted terrace house into a poetic institution for Plath who had overread the history of the house as a palimpsest of Yeats’ past and her own future. If the unmarked 3 Chalcot Square offered a new beginning, 23 Fitzroy Road’s performative markings acted, physically and psychically, as a symbolic matrix for “back talking,” provoking Plath’s imaginative dialog with the house’s past occupant.

Plath continued to desire and subvert domestic orders. As a single mother, she worked against the stranglehold of domestic chores, squeezing her writing into hours before the day began, “... these new poems of mine have one thing in common. They were written at about four in the morning – that still, blue, almost eternal hour before cock crow, before the baby’s cry, before the glassy music of the milkman, settling his bottles.” Both literary critic Al Alvarez and Plath’s friend Clarissa Roche described her new flat as sparsely furnished but meticulously organized. Her fascination with the “village” life of Primrose Hill and wanting to blend in with the picture-perfect houses rivaled with her ambition to establish herself as a poetess. “Shall I write a poem, shall I paint a floor, shall I hug a baby? Everything is such fun, such an adventure, and if I feel this way now, with everything bare and to be painted and curtains to be made, etc., what will I feel when I get the flat as I dream it to be.” She sewed her own curtains at the same time as she struggled to mind her children and produce new work for publishers. The symbolic significance of Yeats’ blue plaque perhaps made “the world inside the apartment” protective, not unlike “a world inside a balloon” giving Plath an “estrangement from the world . . . seen as positive . . .” since in its formal sense, 23 Fitzroy Road was no more than another terrace house along the street, susceptible to the same anxieties of gentility experienced by many families living in the same neighborhood.
The 1960s’ reputation as the “Golden Age of the Family” was, as writer Amanda Craig describes, paradoxical since it was a depressive time for women living in Primrose Hill. Many had to give up their own pursuits to devote themselves full-time to the demanding role of housewife–mother. The pretty houses in Chalcot Crescent belied the way “some families were being eaten away by irresistible underground forces,” and “what was fatal was the possibility of perfection that Primrose Hill seems to offer. . . . the very thing that made us feel so safe was what was killing them.” But Plath had found an escape outlet when she moved into the sanctuary of Yeats’ house. Yeats’ blue plaque transformed 23 Fitzroy Road into a potentially liberating space for Plath to reinvent herself. After her death, the façade of Yeats’ house took on another layer of significance. The façades of both her houses have become indices to episodes of Plath’s life and work. Like the way Plath read the surface of Yeats’ house in relation to his life and work, we are compelled to do the same with the surfaces of her houses through her blue plaque.

The blank sheet: voices of the silent occupant

“The scholars want the anatomy of the birth of poetry,” Hughes remarked, “and the vast potential audience want her blood, hair, touch, smell, and a front seat in the kitchen where she died.” It is possibly this sentiment that sparked the dispute over the appropriate site of Plath’s blue plaque. Many felt it should have been installed at the building where she died, in Yeats’ house. Plath’s daughter, Frieda, wrote that her mother’s marker should be at 3 Chalcot Square “to show she was worth more than the sum of her death.” Perhaps it is at this silent architectural site that Plath might actually be heard. Standing outside the calm green space facing 3 Chalcot Square, I get a sense that the contentious site of Plath’s blue plaque gives us a fuller picture of her relationship to domesticity. Its present position does not foreclose our understanding of her life or her domestic experiences by pointing exclusively to her tragic end. The plaque at Chalcot Square mimics “the centre of Sylvia Plath’s art . . . a tension between words and wordlessness, stasis and movement, entrapment and potentiality,” thereby remaining ambiguous and plural in its implications.

Contrary to the plaque’s 20-word limitation, there is an excessive quality about an architecture constructed through its presence. It does not merely celebrate what is there, but points to what has escaped, is absent, unmarked, or unsaid. As a metonymical device, it indicates things and spaces outside of itself. Plath’s Chalcot Square plaque gestures to her unmarked flat at Fitzroy Road, to the places around Primrose Hill that inspired her poetry, to her position as a “triple-threat” woman in the 1950s, and to the anxieties associated with domesticity and gentility in her time. It forces a palimpsestic
reading of architecture that goes beyond the house’s physical form, but simultaneously relies on the physicality of the house for telling its stories. The plaque’s performative construction of place – “Sylvia Plath lived here” – subverts the temporal ordering of architecture by weaving a late nineteenth-century terrace house with a mid twentieth-century domestic life (Figure 10.3). Through the plaque, each passer-by is given a glimpse of Plath’s domestic interior through the psychical interior of her life and art. This alternative passage is embodied, labyrinthine, excessive, and critical. It is also an intimate passage where the architectural object of the house is hopelessly entangled with the biographical subject of the occupant.

Notes
The author thanks Jane Rendell and Barbara Penner for their incisive suggestions in developing this paper, and Emily Cole for her hospitality at the Blue Plaque archives.

2 E. Cole, Blue Plaques: A Guide to the Scheme, London: English Heritage Publications, 2002, p.2. This publication presents the most comprehensive material on the scheme and its history. It includes a section on the design, manufacture and placement of the plaques. A formal selection criteria was established in 1954. To be eligible for a plaque, the nominee must have been dead for 20 years or have passed the centenary of their birth. They must “have made an important positive contribution to human welfare or happiness.” Cole, Blue Plaques, p. 9.
3 Numbers inferred from English Heritage Blue Plaques in London 2002 published as a supplement to Cole, Blue Plaques. It lists plaques installed between 1867 and 2002 in London.
6 J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, p. 43. Kristeva posits that all language acts – e.g. writing, making, drawing – are controlled by two terms, “the symbolic” and “the semiotic.” The symbolic is structured by conscious familial and societal norms while the semiotic comprises of unconscious drives, impulses, and desires. In stating “the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic,” Kristeva gives the possibility of meaningfully accounting for ways of understanding, speaking and representing that lie outside the remit of existing communicative frameworks. Pertinently, in pursuing an intimate architectural method, feminine writing does not force a split between the self and the site.


11 Ibid., p. 288.


17 Ibid., p. 8.


22 This is the title of Jeannine Dobb’s 1977 article. Dobson concludes her piece provocatively, asking if Plath “chose paths that would lead her deeper and deeper into a domestic labyrinth because she needed those subjects and those experiences and the emotions they stimulated in order to create her best work.” J. Dobbs, “‘Viciousness in the Kitchen’: Sylvia Plath’s Domestic Poetry,” in *Modern Language Studies*, 1977, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 11–25.

23 All information on the blue plaque files courtesy of English Heritage, Savile Row, London.

24 Plath’s name was suggested for a plaque as early as 1984, but her case was put into abeyance pending consideration in 1988 “to allow time for an assessment of her lasting importance as a poet.” In 1989, academic Ruth Richardson wrote passionately to the *Times*
Intimate details of a London blue plaque house

Literary Supplement (May 12, 1989), calling for the public to support Plath’s commemorative plaque. In Plath’s blue plaque file, a total of 25 senior academics were recorded to have responded to Richardson’s plea.


28 Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath*, p. 58. Brain refers to the letters between Plath and her mother archived in the Lilly Library, Indiana University.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., p. 59.


36 In actuality, Yeats had only stayed in that house for a few years as a young boy between the ages of two and eight years.


40 Ibid., p. 219.

41 Ibid.


43 Plath referred to Primrose Hill as her favorite neighborhood and that it was “like a village” in a letter to her friend Dotty on December 14, 1962, shortly after she had moved into Yeats’ house. Another letter written to her mother on the same day again speaks of the warm atmosphere of her neighborhood and the pleasure of so many faces remembering her that she felt as though she was “coming home to a small, loving village.” Plath, *Letters Home*, pp. 486, 488.


45 Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors*, p. 117.


47 Ibid.


52 Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors*, p. 73.
Denatured domesticity
An account of femininity and physiognomy in the interiors of Frances Glessner Lee

Laura J. Miller

The spectral observer
In the very act of constructing domestic space, what is “natural” is eschewed in favor of the culturally scripted. Within the encapsulated space of the domestic interior, fictions of the self and society become transformed into material and spatial fabrications, made legible through an architectural framework. The material culture of the domestic interior provides evidence of how its occupants wish to be recognized. Tightly scripted narratives of self and family are rehearsed ad nauseum until they are naturalized, aided and abetted by artifacts and decor that codify and embellish not only the domestic setting, but also more significantly, the stories being told. If domesticity is as much a performance as it is a practice, who are the witnesses to domesticity’s dramaturgy?

Monitors of the domestic scene are as often an imagined as an actual presence: a spectral composite of class-consciousness and social decorum, conjured by the codes of society and the cultural practices that
order domestic space and its objects. Whether broadly or narrowly construed, an audience expands the domain of domesticity, viewing domestic space in light of an array of social and cultural conditions, and as part of an extensive spatial network, one that far exceeds the interior’s material enclosure. Versed in the taste conventions of a culture, an initiated viewer can assess a domestic scene, codifying the spatial disposition and symbolic programs of its objects and spaces according to the number of likely variations. The combinatorial capacity of the interior’s material artifacts produces a visual rhetoric, articulating narratives about the nature of domesticity and contemporary life.3

Vision: practices of decontamination and containment
Unmediated observation of the domestic scene is an unsettling prospect. The effects of propriety and the routines of everyday life sublimate the ways in which the domestic interior is underpinned not only by its own fictions, but also by its occupants’ need for external acknowledgment. Housework and its incessant demands to maintain order within domestic space, for example, confer a character type and real, physical presence upon what otherwise is vaguely sensed as a disembodied observer of domestic space. The housewife establishes the physical boundaries of visual surveyal and the categories of what will be seen to be significant within a household: evidence of dirt or its absence, cleanliness; order or disorder.4 The figure of the housewife transforms the act of viewing domestic space into a never-ending ritual of inspection,5 securing visuality within a space that is as much conceptually confined, as it is physically limited.

Likewise, codes of etiquette and propriety demark physical and virtual territories that are classified according to hierarchies of privacy established within the domestic setting, providing protocols that govern interaction and visual access within the spaces of the home. The domestic spectator is identified within a known range of possible categories and classes of persons who may plausibly enter the domestic scene and assess its arrangements. Whether a family member, invited guest or stranger, prescribed roles and permissible boundaries limit behavior, movement and actions within the home, such that it is quite clear when these limits are transgressed.6

Domestic insularity
Mechanisms such as housework, etiquette, propriety, and daily routine not only facilitate the orderly fabrication and daily maintenance of the domestic scene, but they also serve as effective instruments of containment and control of the unsanctioned gaze within domestic space. Yet the threat of covert witnesses to the domestic drama being staged is mediated, rather than eradicated, by these tools. More persuasive in the repression of domesticity’s
potentially unchecked visuality is the characterization of domestic space as a cocoon of privacy and retreat, sheltered from public exposure and the discourse of society. The public–private dichotomy is instrumental in sublimating middle-class domesticity’s conflicted relation with its external audience, an audience it simultaneously craves and rejects.

A vestige of the Victorian era’s enthusiastic cult of domesticity, the public–private divide is founded upon the assumption that the moral territory of the home must be insulated from the abrasive effects of public life and contamination by commerce. Ostensibly, domestic space is produced by its estrangement from public discourse and its assumed spatial encapsulation. This is an express denial of the social, cultural, and technological infrastructures that pervade domestic space and motivate its practices today – from class distinctions, to consumer tastes, to electronic media. The distinction between what is properly “inside” or “outside” of domesticity’s domain is increasingly undermined, as the degree to which one realm penetrates the other in modern consumer culture steadily increases. Yet this threat to the stability of domesticity’s spatial categories is suppressed. The rhetoric of domestic insularity persists in the way that domestic space is conceptualized and represented today. Increasingly, the domestic interior is seen as distinct from the spaces outside its immediate domain – spaces that in reality impinge on any interpretation or use of domestic space. Not merely an act of spatial differentiation, the maintenance of the anachronistic divide between the public and private spheres is increasingly an act of disownment of what lies beyond the domestic realm’s visible boundaries.

Of all the fictions fabricated and exhibited in the construction of domestic space, the conceptual opposition of public and private is domesticity’s greatest and most cherished conceit. Like the taxidermic specimen of natural history, domesticity’s “natural” form is a product produced and sustained by the extremes of artifice and the cultural conventions of seeing. Tragically, the degree to which the public–private dichotomy is rigidly upheld can convert the utopian aspirations of the domestic scene, at times, into a dystopian spectacle.

**Frances Glessner Lee: visions of utopian and dystopian domesticity**

The life and work of an unusual woman, Frances Glessner Lee (1878–1962), demonstrate how utopian and dystopian versions of domesticity alike rely on the conceptual cleavage between what is properly inside and outside of domestic space, and how this division delineated masculine and feminine spheres. In their material, spatial and visual evidence, the domestic scenes Glessner Lee lived in and created disclose some of the ways in which the gendered territory of the feminine has been characterized. Her childhood home
links the Victorian veneration of privacy with the female figure’s identification with interior space and the arrangement of the domestic scene. Later in life, Glessner Lee created a series of miniature crime scene dioramas, many depicting domestic settings. Her dioramas peel back the domestic scene’s veneer of privacy, propriety, and routine, opening the home to reinterpretation through its exposure as the scene of a crime. Through her dioramas, Glessner Lee created her own liminal space, located between the seemingly rigid, proprietary spheres of public and private, inside and outside, and masculine and feminine, as these spatial categories were defined – and challenged – in her lifetime. Glessner Lee’s miniature domestic scenes became a means for obtaining professional recognition, and a vehicle that allowed her to transgress many limitations imposed by spatial and gender stereotypes.

The encapsulated interior

Frances Glessner grew up in a house designed by H.H. Richardson, the foremost American architect of his time. The Glessner House (1885–1887) is considered to be one of Richardson’s finest works, yet the house’s domestic image was initially controversial and even profoundly disturbing to some. The house’s brooding, Arts and Crafts sobriety stood in somber contrast to other houses built by Chicago’s social elite along Prairie Avenue, a fashionable neighborhood south of downtown. Epitomizing the conceptual divide of this period between the public realm and the private interior, the Glessner House institutionalized the image of the private house, rendering it as a monumental form in granite. Projecting a Romanesque virility through its massive, fortress-like stone exterior – compared by one contemporary critic to a prison – the voluminous interiority of the house’s rarified spaces was accentuated and framed as a world apart, rhetorically emphasizing the insularity of domestic life conducted within the house.

The Glessners sought a domestic life that would appear to be inviting and unpretentious, yet would indicate their status and position in society. Richardson provided his clients with access to the taste cultures of the East Coast cultural elite. In addition to his architectural expertise, the Glessners sought his guidance in selecting the house’s interior appointments. Richardson designed the house’s interiors as a series of unfolding spatial tableaux. Observers of the Glessner family’s domestic life were presented with strategic views of important pieces of furniture and collections of objects (Figure 11.1). In the accumulation and arrangement of tasteful objects within its interiors, and its rhetorical display of an aesthetic restraint lacking in other Gilded-Age houses of the period, the Glessner House exhibits the central importance of the domestic realm in the interwoven construction of late nineteenth-century aesthetic and moral narratives.
The Glessners’ library contained books on home decoration, a popular genre of aesthetic and social commentary. Along with magazines such as *The Ladies Home Journal*, such books shaped acceptable standards of taste for the upwardly mobile classes, and advised readers on decorating choices that would project the status to which they aspired. These publications sanctioned the domestic interior as the domain of its female overseer, in contrast to the world “outside.” The woman of the house was both agent and subject of the aesthetic unity of the home. In quite literal ways, the female figure and her home were seen as one. Illustrations such as those of Clarence Cook’s *The House Beautiful* portrayed the female figure alongside key elements that projected the ethical and moral values of the home – its fireplace, bookshelves, and bedrooms. The woman’s moral and decorative role within the home was collapsed into a single representation. Aesthetic harmony was inseparable from the practical activities undertaken by the virtuous housewife and unthinkable outside of the visual and spatial categories that linked domestic comfort and privacy. Women were advised:

The object of the home is to be the center, the point of tenderest interest, the pivot on which family life turns. The first requisite is to make it attractive – so attractive that none of its inmates shall care to linger long outside of its limits. All legitimate means should be employed to this end, and no effort should be spared that can contribute to this purpose.
Feminine intellectual and creative energies were channeled into activities related to the reproduction of the domestic realm. Middle- and upper-class women’s work focused on the minutiae of domestic life. Inventories and mending, on the practical side of housework, were supplemented by productive leisure activities: embroidery, scene painting, window gardening, and other decorative pursuits. Women’s handiwork reified the matriarchal propriety of domestic space and reinforced the feminized visual rhetoric of the domestic scene. As a girl, Frances took up the making of miniatures, a popular feminine pastime. Later in life, she would literally reproduce entire domestic scenes, with very different and quite disturbing effects.

Subverting interiority
Frances Glessner had been raised to assume a career as a society matron, a role that required devotion to home, family, philanthropy, and hobbies that were sure to occupy an otherwise too-active mind. A sheltered and indulged child, Frances grew up in a household that was entirely conventional by contemporary standards. Her mother was a cultured and ideal “helpmeet” to her industrialist husband,21 overseeing their home’s domestic arrangements and involved in their cultural causes. Frances was educated at home by a tutor, as was her brother George. Although George was sent to Harvard, Frances opted for marriage at an early age to Blewett Lee.

Glessner Lee would eventually reject the role that she had been groomed since birth to fulfill, leaving her husband and children to pursue her talent for building and visualization, and her interest in criminal investigation.22 Yet despite her disengagement from her family, her intellectual life was pursued according to the established societal norms for a woman of her background. Assuming the familiar roles she had witnessed her mother perform and that she had enacted in her life as a married woman, Glessner Lee forayed into the world of crime detection.

Her involvement in criminology was initially fed by an appetite for detective novels and a friendship with her brother’s classmate, George Burgess Magrath23 who later became the Chief Medical Examiner of Suffolk County, Boston. Glessner Lee subsequently endowed Harvard University’s Department of Legal Medicine in 1931, becoming its benefactress.24 Assuming the role of hostess, she sponsored and ran seminars and banquets for police detectives, overseeing elaborate preparations for menus, floral arrangements, and table settings.25 But it was through her co-option of a feminine pastime, the making of miniature rooms and dolls’ houses, that Glessner Lee achieved notice within the field of criminal investigation.26 Her hobby might have taken a course similar to that of her Chicago contemporary, Mrs James Ward Thorne, who produced a series of miniature period rooms featured at various museums and expositions, now at the Art Institute of Chicago.

The interiors of Frances Glessner Lee
Thorne’s dioramas were exemplary in their refinement and curatorial ambition, and provided a suitable diversion for a wealthy patron of the arts.27

Glessner Lee would not opt for such a conventional path. She became convinced that death investigations could be solved through the application of scientific methods and careful analysis of visual evidence, influenced by contemporary theory in the field of criminology. From the 1920s to the 1940s, she constructed a series of more than 18 dioramas, the *Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death*. Their didactic program was similar to early dolls’ houses, built to serve as models for young girls who would become matrons overseeing their own households. Such dolls’ houses exhibited proper practices in housekeeping and virtuous living.28 Like Glessner Lee’s dioramas, their moral content was to be absorbed visually – they were not playthings for children. Glessner Lee’s agenda was not to reinforce domestic practices and the female oversight of the home to the *Nutshells*’ viewers. Rather, her dioramas illustrated the dark side of domesticity.

In pursuit of her professional work, Glessner Lee never fully abandoned domestic spaces or “women’s activities.” Was this her choice, or an organic limitation imposed by contemporaneous attitudes about gender and the workplace? A crime scene or the morgue were hardly spaces for ladies of good breeding and fine manners to discuss, not to mention appear. Through her *Nutshells*, Glessner Lee invented a means to escape the confinement of her identity – and her mind – solely to the genteel and comfortable spaces of the home. That she did so by creating miniature interiors, evidently never leaving behind the very space she hoped to transcend, might be seen as ironic or even tragic. Yet “leaving behind” domestic space for the public sphere only reinforces the very boundaries that serve to make the interior a space of confinement.29 Instead, Glessner Lee forged her own brand of forensic analysis and her own version of a career.

**The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death**

The *Nutshells* were used for the instruction of forensic techniques of observation. Glessner Lee believed that proper attention to the evidence presented in her dioramas would allow the observant viewer to uncover the facts about the circumstances of the death depicted, demonstrating how a rational investigation of material evidence would expose the truth. Viewed as historical devices, the *Nutshells* reveal a way of seeing that was neither part of the reconstruction of the crime, nor of the dioramas’ practical use as methodological instruments. A plainly visible story can be seen in the spaces depicted, showing us how such spaces – and their inhabitants – were viewed and typified. Glessner Lee’s interiors exhibit moral assumptions embedded in the act of seeing space, absorbed from many contemporary discourses.
Construing character through physical profiling – the pseudo-science of physiognomy – enjoyed wide popular acceptance from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. As the related fields of legal medicine and criminal anthropology emerged in the late nineteenth century, physiognomy’s precepts were rationalized by scientific methods through the measurement and classification of the body. Attitudes regarding the body as evidence of hidden attributes such as criminality were also invigorated by evolutionary theory. The effects of environment on the behavior and appearance of an organism were mirrored in contemporary attitudes regarding how a space could depict the character of its occupants. A popular physiognomic tract of 1922 advised: “Man can only become successful when he begins to realize that mentally and physically he must be able to harness the evolutionary forces about him and subject them to his will,” and asked, “Now what is the environment that man has to conquer? Man’s environment consists of many things – the clothes that cover him, the house in which he lives, its furniture and fittings, the food that sustains him, and most important to him, the men, women and children that live around him.”

Likewise, physiognomy of the interior codifies the detective novel’s narrative structure. The crime’s physical setting and the environments characters inhabit are not only clues to solving the crime; they represent one of the only aspects in the genre of detective fiction where the author has true license. Such was the case of the Nutshells. Although the crimes depicted were composites of actual cases, the character and decoration of the dioramas’ interiors was Glessner Lee’s own invention. The contrast between the domesticity depicted in the Nutshells and that of her childhood home is obvious (Figure 11.2). The Nutshells display a nostalgic, often tawdry middle-class domesticity; some depict marginal spaces that society’s disenfranchised might inhabit – for example, boarding houses or rented rooms next to a factory.
In reducing the spatial conditions of the dwelling to the dimensions of an object, the *Nutshells*’ miniature rooms make the boundaries between the domestic interior and the world outside plainly visible. The diorama’s removal of one wall of a room emphasizes the absence of a critical mediating boundary and destabilizes conventional understandings of interior and exterior, and therefore, the coding of private and public space. Without established limits to provide a proper viewing distance or position, as propriety and etiquette accomplish in the private home, the domestic observer is confronted simultaneously by an impenetrable distance from, and the overwhelming intimacy of, a domestic scene gone disturbingly wrong.

Unlike Clarence Cook’s genteel figures, which softly dissolve into the domestic scene, the bodies in Glessner Lee’s dioramas are conspicuous. An alarming number are women, particularly those who suffered violent deaths. Many are of low social standing and “types” assumed to possess questionable judgment, if not moral character – women “led astray” by alcohol, men, misfortune, or their own desire. In her depictions of domestic scenes and the evidence of violence within, Glessner Lee crafted dystopia in a dolls’ house.

**Reclassifying the domestic scene**

When it erupts, domestic violence shatters the proscenial framework of propriety and habit through which domestic space is typically regarded and implicitly understood. In a repulsive catalog of transgressive acts, from psychological abuse to murder, domestic violence reclassifies the space of the home. As a crime scene, the domestic scene ceases to be a space of fictional projection and utopian fantasy.

Sometime during their lives, close to one-third of American women will report an act of domestic violence against them. Yet it is estimated that half of domestic violence incidents go unreported, placing this number potentially much higher. Some 85 percent of the victims of intimate partner violence (abuse involving a spouse or lover) are female; a third of intimate partner abuse cases result in the death of the victim. The likelihood that a home may become the setting for a violent crime is certainly conceivable; that its victim will be a woman, is highly probable.

In the cleavage between public space and the private home, domestic violence finds a place of refuge. The home’s foundation as an institution of patriarchal authority cannot fully account for violence’s residence within the home. Rather, it is the house’s “capacity to conceal” embedded within its representational status – offered as a paradigm of morality to those who view it – that allows domestic violence to thrive. While domestic violence is a transgressive act, its presence within the home is not a transgression, then, but an opportunistic exploitation of domesticity’s most pervasive and damaging conceit. Casting domestic space in opposition to the public realm, in
concert with the ordinarily benign rituals and contrivances that limit or contain outside scrutiny of the domestic scene, produces the spatial possibility for violence to be at home. The home’s ostensibly impermeable boundary between inside and outside serves as a covert apparatus, assuring that domestic violence will rarely be seen, at least until it is too late.

Everyday events that overwrite or erode other narratives and symbolic structures constituting the dramaturgy of any domestic scene are replaced, when the home becomes a crime scene, with an explicit exhibition of disbelief. Horror and a superabundance of detail are displayed, in the form of the crime scene’s random wealth of material evidence. What once were comforting and familiar objects and rooms are exposed to be duplicitous in their meaning – ciphers, either of personal sentimentality or criminal acts. These spaces and objects reveal a polarity in their visual rhetoric, vacillating between the mundane and the monstrous. They await stabilization through their reclassification.

**Interrogating space**

The forensic investigator takes on the tedious task of sorting through the detritus of domestic life gone awry. Like the housewife, the investigator claims a specific identity and an agenda: to interrogate a space and its objects through meticulous visual analysis. The investigator’s vision within the crime scene is directed by a rationalized, geometric pattern mapped onto space, systematizing inspection (Figure 11.3). Map-making is a way of making space accountable. At the scene of the crime, that accounting will be moral as well as geometric. Possessing the classifier’s omnipotent vision and indispensable tool, the grid, the forensic detective has license to examine any aspect of the spaces implicated in a crime. This information is assayed patiently, with the conviction that it will eventually yield the details of the crime committed, if only the scene can be seen properly.

Forensic investigation of a space questions how a space and its artifacts plausibly belong together. How can the disorder on display be made to yield its story? Rather than a single account of the evidence, forensic technique relies upon multiple alternative narratives. This multiplicity is key to understanding how violence is something that is “always already there” in domestic space. Seen through forensic analysis, an interior is not characterized according to an aesthetic schema, as is usual in interior or architectural design, or typically, in viewing the domestic scene itself. Instead, the investigator views material evidence through the aspects that constitute their differences. Objects and spatial characteristics must be categorized individually before they can be associated with an overall reading of a space’s visual rhetoric. Contraventions in position or appearance, perhaps indicating an object’s implication in the crime, are measured against the normative
placement and uses of objects within domestic scenes. Forensic visuality is in this way a practice of particularization. It atomizes objects and space, undermining the conditioned visual consumption of a domestic scene, by insisting that its visual rhetoric be reconstituted, object by object, and space to space.

Rehearsing a retinue of possible narratives that are continually weighed against the typical fictions evidenced in the surveyal of any domestic
space, the method of the forensic investigator reveals that violence is not an
alien presence within what may be seen as a typical home. Ingrained into
the fabric of domestic space, violence “constitute[s] rather than disturb[s]” the
spaces of everyday life.44 Seen as a murder site, the domestic interior cannot
sustain the foremost fiction of domestic space: that the home is a truly private
enclave, apart from the reach of society and the gaze of strangers. At the
crime scene, the domestic scene’s utopic assumptions of privacy and the
ordered routines of the everyday are replaced by the certainty of exposure
to investigative scrutiny and the unspeakable violation of the social order evi-
denced in its reclassification. Underneath the cherished fictions of domestic
space, dystopia is found.

Evidence
Returning to Glessner Lee’s Nutshells’, what might their visual evidence
reveal to us about the dystopian underpinnings of the domestic scene? Were
the Nutshells, as Glessner Lee asserted, merely factual representations,
whose truth would be evident through systematic scrutiny? Was she deriding
the decorative tastes of the middle and lower classes in her design of the
Nutshells’ interiors? Did she use the visual rhetoric of her domestic scenes to
make an assessment of a crime victim’s morality, in the tradition of physiog-
nomic analysis? Forensic analysis asserts that a crime scene’s appearance has
multiple accounts embedded within it. The following are but a few of the many
hypothetical narratives accounting for the visual evidence presented in
Glessner Lee’s Nutshells (Figure 11.4).

In setting her crime scenes within domestic spaces, did Glessner
Lee manifest her rage at the confinement of women by the patriarchal social
standards of her day and her own assumed consignment to the domestic
realm? Portraying the female figure within the domestic scene as an inert
victim presented unequivocal evidence of the toxic effects of spatial encapsu-
lation on women: their lives were nullified, literally or figuratively.

Did Glessner Lee see herself as a modern philanthropist, pursuing
public betterment in a more socially relevant and rational manner than women
of her mother’s generation?45 Domestic violence was a subject left relatively
untouched by society and law enforcement during her lifetime.46 “Trouble at
home” was seen to be caused by a psychological defect in the abused – most
often a woman – according to the psychiatrist Helene Deutsch, whose theo-
ries regarding domestic violence gained wide acceptance in the 1930s–
1940s,47 when Glessner Lee was most productive in making her dioramas.
Was Glessner Lee exposing these closeted scenes to an all-male audience of
police detectives48 in order to focus attention on what should be seen – not a
projected psychological condition, but a physical fact?
Rather than a caricature of middle- and lower-class tastes or a setting for a morality play, could Glessner Lee’s *Nutshell* scenes be seen, following Judith Butler’s analysis of the constructed nature of gender and its practices as drag performance, as a burlesque of domestic space? To be sure, the exaggerated decor of the dioramas’ interiors and their pronounced visual rhetoric make the many fictions complicit in domesticity’s cultural construction blatantly evident. Viewed in this way, the extremes of artifice exhibited in the domestic scenes of the *Nutshells of Unexplained Death*, like Glessner Lee herself, could hardly be overlooked.

Attempts to resolve the *Nutshells’* visual evidence in light of the circumstances of Glessner Lee’s life only expose a contemporary conceit about our own visuality: that it can be penetrating and objective, or eventually reveal the truth. That is a charge best left to the forensic investigator alone. Counter to the beliefs of Glessner Lee and the criminologists of her day, visual evidence within the domestic scene cannot be seen apart from the applied rhetoric that inevitably and surreptitiously accompanies it – rhetoric refashioned periodically according to the preoccupations of a particular place in time and social space. What we can learn from Glessner Lee is that the spatial and visual categories of domesticity become most compelling when they are transgressed; her life and work are evidence, and testament, to that fact.
Notes
This essay was written while I was the American Fellow in Architectural Design at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study; I am immensely grateful for the support of the Institute and that of my fellow Radcliffe Fellows. Many thanks to Hilde Heynen, who suggested that I consider, in relation to my work on the domestic scenes of Frances Glessner Lee, the question of whether violence is something “already inside” of domestic space. Thanks also to Arielle Saiber, Ilana Lowy, Despina Stratigakos, and Richard Sommer who read previous versions of this essay; they provided criticism and suggestions that were insightful and valuable. Last, my thanks to the Glessner House Archive and its staff for providing access and assistance.

1 In discussing the domestic interior throughout this essay, I refer to spaces created by those who have the luxury of choosing the interior appointments for the spaces they inhabit – primarily the middle and upper classes.


4 “When we honestly reflect on our busy scrubbings and cleanings . . . we know that we are not mainly trying to avoid disease. We are separating, placing boundaries, making visible statements about the home that we are intending to create out of the material house.” Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966, p. 68.

5 Housekeeping manuals categorized household tasks by the room in which they took place or the day of the week they were to be performed, providing an itinerary of inspection within the spaces of the home for the woman of the house and those who assisted her. See Christine Terhune Herrick, Housekeeping Made Easy, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1888; Mrs Elizabeth F. Holt, From Attic to Cellar, or, Housekeeping Made Easy, Salem: The Salem Press, 1892.

6 For example, the strategic isolation of the parlor in middle-class homes in the late nineteenth century prevented visitors from entering or seeing into the spaces actually lived in by the family, whereas the picture window in the middle-class suburban living room of the mid-twentieth century ostensibly opened up the interior of the home to its neighbors’ oversight. But the parlor and the picture window were visual decoys: most of the everyday living took place elsewhere in the home. Both demonstrate how the architecture of domestic spaces is arranged to control and direct the ways that outside vision penetrates into the spaces of the home.

7 While the deployment of large areas of glass in postwar homes did erase the profound division between interior and exterior, this did not necessarily create “an ‘ambiguity’ between public and private space,” as Lynn Spiegel has argued. Lynn Spiegel, “The Suburban Home Companion: Television and the Neighborhood Ideal in Postwar America,” in Sexuality and Space, B. Colomina, ed., Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992, p. 187. Rather, the suburban yard seen through the picture window was an extension of the domestic domain – private property controlled by the occupants of the house.

8 If anything, the gated community of today is a paranoid reaction to the effective porosity of domestic space’s physical and virtual boundaries.

9 In the 1880s, an architectural journal held a symposium on the ten finest buildings in America; five were Richardson’s. Lewis Mumford, Sticks and Stones: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization, New York: Dover Publications, 1955, p. 103.

11 Positive and negative comments on the Glessner House were collected by Frances M. Glessner (Mrs John J. Glessner), *Building the Glessner House: Excerpts from the Journal of Mrs John J. Glessner*, unpublished text, John Glessner Lee, 1969, Glessner House Archive.


13 The Glessner’s “simple” family life depended upon nine to twelve household servants, who supported the daily life and operations of the household. *Servants in the Glessner House*, unpublished text, author unknown, Glessner House Archive. Well over half of the house’s floor area was devoted to “behind the scenes” service functions.


15 For example, the Cork Alcove, located off of the library and directly above the front door, contained photographs and prints of notable persons in the Glessner’s acquaintance. This collection would have been the last scene glimpsed before leaving the house, underscoring the family’s cultural and social connections to visitors.


17 *Library Catalogue and Index*, undated record kept by Frances M. Glessner, Glessner House Archive.

18 For example, see Charles L. Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery, and Other Details*. Boston, MA: James R. Osgood 1872, pp.156–163.


21 “A dear old lady once said to me in all seriousness, ‘Mr. Glessner, you are a very important member of this community; you have a position of great prominence and influence; you get it from your wife and your house.’ Don’t think this disparagement of me. I thought it a real compliment, for I selected the one and I built the other.” John J. Glessner, *The Story of a House*, album of text and photographs addressed to his children, 1923. Text reprint, Chicago Architecture Foundation, 1992, p. 6.


24 In addition to her founding contribution to the Harvard Medical School’s Department of Legal Medicine, Glessner Lee endowed the Department’s Magrath Library, its Chair in Legal Medicine, supported the Harvard Seminars in Homicide Investigation and donated her *Nutshells* for curricular use.

26 Glessner Lee’s “marvelous . . . progressive work,” in her dioramas and seminars was acclaimed by many, including mystery author Erle Stanley Gardner. The Case of the Dubious Bridegroom, New York: Pocket Books, 1953, Foreword.


30 Lavater’s popular and controversial Essays on Physiognomy: For the Promotion of Knowledge and the Love of Mankind (1778), for example, remained in print throughout the nineteenth century. By the twentieth century, popular books on character analysis conflated physiognomy with vocational and sales advice; see Harry H. Balkin, The New Science of Analyzing Character, Boston, MA: Harry H. Balkin, 1922.


39 Ibid., p. 136.

40 Ibid., p. 131.


43 Hilde Heynen, email correspondence with author.


Laura J. Miller

46 Pleck, Domestic Tyranny, p. 182.
48 A photograph from Harvard Medical School’s Department of Legal Medicine’s Twentieth Seminar in Homicide Investigation (1955) shows Glessner Lee surrounded by 31 men – typically, she was the only woman at the table. Giessner House Archive.
Spatial practices articulate with sexualized identities in ways that are sometimes unforeseen by architects. The contributions to this section read into particular buildings to decipher the complicated exchange between the materiality of architecture and lived practices. By analyzing spatial choreographies from critical perspectives, they demonstrate how gendered bodies construct as much as they are constructed by the architecture of their habitats.

Ernestina Osorio’s essay on the house and studio of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera is a study of the mutual inscriptions between architectural space and its occupants. Focusing on the spatial relationships within the house, Osorio constructs critical links between these and the radical differences and unsettling relationship between Kahlo and Rivera. Christopher Wilson’s study of the *Maison de Verre* follows a similar track, although his method of spatial analysis involves the politics of vision. Distinguishing between the notions of medical gaze and domestic glance, Wilson links the programmatic sections of the house to the gender roles of its users. His critical analysis shows how these roles are both asserted and liberated by means of architectural gestures. André Loeckx focuses on the multiple layers present in the domestic architecture of Marie-José Van Hee, a contemporary Flemish architect. Analyzing how her designs pick up clues from the client’s brief, the urban context and the requirements of everyday living, he shows that they are performing complex spatial mediations that allow for shifting interpretations of gendered subject positions.

Charles Rice focuses on the notion of domestic interior and sees the latter as both a material space and a space of representation. He traces the “doubleness” of the interior and its gender implications in relation to Adolf Loos’ architecture, discourse, and photographic work. Anne Troutman examines the historical boudoir as the ultimate space of femininity and follows its architectural traces into the modern period. She explores the feminine associations of the boudoir both as a functional space and a space where a particular architectural vocabulary is mobilized. Her aim is to point the way to alternative architectural practices that emphasize the feminine sphere.
Whereas the first section of this book describes the formation of gendered subjects and the second section deals with sexually charged discursive spaces, the third and final section is devoted to the role of spatial forms as such. In this section – clearly the most “architectural” – the architect’s intervention in shaping spaces that interact with gender roles comes to the fore. If the previous two sections show that there are mutual inscriptions between architectural discourses, subject positions, and spatial hierarchies, this section asks how far the architect’s conscious manipulation of spatial articulations can unbalance and hence criticize conventional patterns, thus opening up the field for richer, more diverse, and less hierarchically structured experiences of gendered subjectivities.
Chapter 12

Unequal union

La Casa Estudio de San Angel Inn, c. 1929–1932

Ernestina Osorio

At the time of its completion, La Casa Estudio de San Angel Inn was a bold statement by its designer, Juan O’Gorman, but any description of O’Gorman’s house-studio for Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera must include the famous couple themselves. Frida and Diego are symbols who require an acknowledgment of the inextricable links between social and cultural history, between personal narratives and architectural history. Few couples are comprised of individuals whose lives merited the attention of voluminous and numerous biographies, and countless studies devoted to them.¹

La Casa Estudio was begun in 1929 and completed in 1932, and Frida and Diego occupied the house-studio from 1932 to 1939, except for a period of separation in 1935–1936, prompted by increasing marital discord.² This “couple-house” consists of two volumetric boxes joined by a footbridge: a thin, precariously suspended quasi-umbilical cord – or perhaps electric cord – that forms a connection between his and her spaces, echoing the female biological imagery of Kahlo’s paintings. In defining a house for the woman, her difference is measured as a couple. The house-studio acted simultaneously as a filter, mediator, and reflective mirror between the competing forces of the private lives of the inhabitants, their guests, and the viewing public. The resulting blurring of private and public spaces relates to the role of domesticity, as it functioned at once to contain memories and desire, to locate the scandal associated with Diego and Frida’s tumultuous relationship, to
mechanize living, and to gradually become a representation of the iconic status of its two primary residents. While independent, only in their union is their legacy most profoundly felt, and within this union, individualized and collective expression oscillates in varying degrees of fluidity and agitation.

The Kahlo–Rivera house-studio transcended the functionalist, materialist, formalist, and ideological definitions of modernity in early 1930s’ Mexico City. While current evaluations of the “twin houses” examine these aspects within the context of post-revolutionary Mexico vis-à-vis internationalist currents, scholarship rarely considers alternative readings of this project, such as the architect–client relationship or the personal narratives that led to its unique assemblage. As Valerie Fraser has pointed out, this complex, “was socially as well as architecturally radical: the separate studio-houses reflected Rivera and Kahlo’s semi-detached marriage.” Starting from this observation, I would like to draw out the understanding that the designer and his clients reached in creating this paired structure and how its paired nature not only reflected the couple’s relationship, but was determined by and facilitated the tensions between them. I will also highlight how Frida and Diego determined the design of La Casa Estudio and how its design facilitated their actions.

Icons of a New Mexico
The Mexican Revolution of 1910–1917 drew plenty of international interest on the part of writers and journalists, and subsequently allowed a proliferation of cultural and artistic production. During the 1920s and 1930s, Mexico City was a site for the convergence of artists and intellectuals. As a center for expatriates from the United States, Japan, Cuba, Italy, France, and the Soviet Union, it was creative and ideologically thriving. A considerable number of familiar names fall into the cultural tapestry that defined this city during this time, both during, before and just after the 1930s. They include D.H. Lawrence, Tina Modotti, Edward Weston, John dos Passos, Sergei Eisenstein, Leon Trotsky, and André Breton. Many traveled to Mexico in search of a cure to the existential crises and general malaise afflicting their native lands, especially war-torn early twentieth-century Europe. For them, Mexico symbolized a site of redemption and, in some cases, signaled the potential for reinvention.

The cultural climate of Mexico City of this period unfolds in relation to the larger milieu of the capital. The question of artistic and architectural production is intimately tied to the political and economic changes brought about by the revolution and which resulted in overwhelming cultural shifts, which the house-studio contributed to and helped to shape. The revolution, which overthrew Porfirio Diaz’ more than 30-year reign, galvanized a concerted postwar effort on the part of artists and intellectuals to engage in the
definition and expression of a modern Mexican culture. This led to the deployment of a number of strategies to reinforce a complex political agenda that attempted to position a country at the threshold of political and industrial transformation. The post-revolutionary period featured attempts to simultaneously cut off Mexico from the past and cast it into the future via a reimagining of itself aesthetically and ideologically. Mexico City at this time was a city where a rapidly growing working class created a demand for new domiciles. Consequently, the government followed a program of national projects that emphasized housing for workers and the poor, public schools, government administrative buildings, and hospitals.4

This was the contextual background of La Casa Estudio and its collaborating designer and inhabitants. The eldest, Rivera, was born in 1886 in Guanajuato. After studying art in Mexico City, he spent ten years in Europe, where he was associated with the avant-garde and learned mural painting techniques that would greatly influence his career upon returning to his country after the revolution. O’Gorman was born on July 6, 1905 in Coyoacán, Mexico City. He attended the National Preparatory School and then the National University of Mexico, where he studied architecture and art. He was a product of the revolution and matured into a committed proponent of its ideals. As a rebellious student who moved with and was instrumental in shaping the progressive architectural avant-garde, he was later recognized for designing Mexico’s first modernist house and is credited with introducing the country to international modernism. Frida Kahlo was born on July 6, 1907 in her parents’ house in Coyoacán, Mexico City. She would later reinvent her birth year and claim to be three years younger than she actually was to align herself mythically with the year of the inception of the Mexican Revolution.

When Frida’s family experienced financial difficulty after the revolution, she decided to convert her painting into a source of income. A determined and strong-willed young woman who had already survived polio in her youth and a near-fatal streetcar accident as a teenager, she approached Rivera with samples of her work when he was painting the Secretary of Public Education building murals, and asked for his review and advice. She also invited him to call her at her family’s home. Her intelligence, keen sensitivity, nationalist pride, and raw talent all attracted the master painter to the young, naïve artist.

O’Gorman had sustained a long-lasting acquaintance turned friendship with Frida since their school days at the National Preparatory School. In several ways, his life’s parallels with Frida’s are uncanny. They shared a birthday and both were born in Coyoacán to immigrant parents. His acquaintance with Rivera dated back to 1922, to the period when the artist was working on the Bolívar theater mural at the prep. school. It was also the period in which
young Frida and O’Gorman first came into contact with Diego. O’Gorman was like a generational bridge between his two clients, being closer in age to each of them than they were to each other. O’Gorman also bridged Frida’s and Diego’s disparate lives, as he was closer to Frida personally and to Diego professionally. O’Gorman felt indebted to Diego, so the architect may have felt the house-studio was his way of thanking the artist and yielding to him. Diego paid for the construction of the house with mural and private commission fees.\(^5\)

At the time of the construction of the house-studio, Frida’s career was in its formative stages. She was primarily Diego’s wife, very much his personal assistant, attending to his private affairs, while also acting as an apprentice. Diego was at the peak of his career at the time of the house-studio’s construction. Their day typically began with breakfast downstairs in Frida’s apartment.\(^6\) They would plan their day and then Diego would go to work in his studio or into the country to sketch. Sometimes Frida would also go to work in her studio, although she was not as consistent as Diego. Usually, she would be driven into the center of Mexico City where she would visit friends or one of her sisters. Frida’s childhood home symbolized contentment and enclosure, whereas the house-studio was associated with the publicity of Diego’s career.

La Casa Estudio seems to neatly compartmentalize varying programmatic needs into several areas, classifying domestic functions and possible scenarios into practical order. On the surface, it seems quite modern. However, further examination reveals similarities with earlier domestic architecture. As much as the house-studio is associated with the interaction between a man and his mistress, it also fits within older social norms that highlight the differences between a family and its servants. Separate spaces delineate lines of socio-economic and sexual differences, and the architecture emphatically pronounces these distinctions.

**Functionalism within the framework of revolution**

To O’Gorman, architecture had to transcend the formal and incorporate a deeper level of meaning. La Casa Estudio’s engagement with programmatic changes, artistic discourse, and its position as an ongoing refuge for intellectuals broaden the scope of its impact. As a reinforced concrete building, its appearance was strange. A functional house had not yet been made in Mexico. This architecture was in marked contrast to typical house designs of the late 1920s, which were primarily historicist and stylistically eclectic. In fact, a functional house contrasts with the symbolism of Frida and Diego, two remarkably extra-functional individuals, taken in the light of their celebrity status. A functional family might not have needed or wanted such a space. The studio, a large part of Diego’s space, may have driven the overall design of
the house. As the space of an artist, one expects this functionality as the expression of its occupant, Diego.

We might consider how O’Gorman’s temporary espousal of functionalist theories allowed a suppression of one apartment in favor of the other. This allows us to understand the house-studio beyond formal geometric composition or as an experiment in functionalism. The widespread use of glass in both buildings, for example, is questionable as an expression of functionalist theories in terms of their practicality. It certainly pertained to the functionalist aesthetic, but was as stylized as the historicist architecture that radical functionalists criticized. On the one hand, light is necessary for the proper creation and display of items in a studio. Thus, the use of glass has a distinctly functional implementation that facilitates the artist in his work. On the other hand, it has the decided disadvantage with regard to the climate of Mexico City. A typical assumption is that because the building is in Mexico, the climate is generally hot. Mexico City, however, is not only at high altitude, but also is in a valley, which results in year-round cool nights; Diego’s glazed studio faces north. Granted, the bedrooms are located on the south-facing side – the milder climate zone. This is problematic in the summer, when the sun strikes most strongly into the studio.

Other issues weighed on the orientation of the building – issues inextricably linked to the desires of O’Gorman’s clients. The bedrooms, in addition to serving as a dormitory, also functioned as Diego’s models’ changing-rooms. This suspension of certain functional elements in the construction of La Casa Estudio contrasts with O’Gorman’s own espoused beliefs. Yet he himself considered the construction of houses hedonistic. His critique of house design and construction as self-indulgent suggests that it is detached from and unable to relate to larger societal questions, such as housing for workers and for the poor – issues that were at the forefront of the revolution. O’Gorman associates international modernism with a disinterestedness in how the social, political, and economic contexts affect local conditions. This points to his desire to best serve the wishes of his clients over the best design that might serve them. If this were an expensive commission, he would have likely suppressed his own desire to optimize the orientation of the building for lighting and heat to surface the desire for privacy or exhibition.

La Casa Estudio with its paired dwellings had multiple entrances – gates to the compound itself, separate entrances to each of the buildings, and separate garages for each of the inhabitants. The multiple entrances are not so much expressive of a subversive compositional strategy as of the users’ needs and compulsions. They suggest the architect’s acknowledgment and amplification of the parallels between the couple’s unconventional and often perverse relationship, and the architectural spaces that accommodated them.
The indirect paths between the two apartments are exaggerated and their effects amplified in situating and exacerbating tensions between the couple:

When Frida was angry at him, she could lock the door on her end of the bridge, forcing him to go downstairs, cross the yard, and knock on her front door. There, as often as not, he would be told by a servant that his wife refused to receive him. Huffing and puffing, Rivera would climb his stairs, cross the bridge again, and through Frida’s closed door, plead for forgiveness.  

Diego and Frida formed a union of two wildly and distinctly independent personalities, inextricably linked to each other. Their relationship is reflected in the house-studio’s distribution of spaces and masses, as well as in their own acknowledgment of these as flexible spaces. The discord in their marriage achieves a rhythm in their literal unions and separations that is echoed in the house-studio’s spatial organization, form, and proportions.

The architect and his clients

O’Gorman and his clients must have acknowledged the larger implications that their collaboration would have on modern architecture. This critical recognition has implications for visuality and the artist’s agency in the dissemination of ideas that inform larger bodies of knowledge and elevates the artist’s role on a wider societal level. Diego, O’Gorman, and Frida recognized and optimized this opportunity. Frida’s involvement in the commission was apparently minimal. Raquel Tibol’s biography of Frida includes a chapter on La Casa Azul, but barely mentions the house-studio in San Angel, and even there it is referred to as “Diego’s house.” Rivera’s influence on the design and life of the house is so intense that he is often referred to as the architect.

There are broad implications that Diego consciously added designs that facilitated his licentious behavior. Frida, aware of her position as the third in a line of wives and Diego’s propensity for infidelity, might have anticipated his indiscretions and found a private place for herself. Considering Diego’s control of the project, one wonders if he consciously chose designs that facilitated both of their behaviors. The design may have aided Diego’s maintenance of his behavior and his disingenuous attempt to protect Frida from its effects. From this perspective, La Casa Estudio’s design is a taunting gesture. On the one hand it asserts Diego’s control and dominance over Frida, and their living and working areas in the form of drawing the lines between their spaces. On the other hand, it allows Frida to peer in and arouse her curiosity by simply opening and walking out of her door, climbing the precarious concrete cantilevered stairway on the exterior north side of her apartment and crossing the bridge to heartbreak.
As Diego’s biographer, Bertram Wolfe, explained, “In a country where intrigue, concealment, deception, double standard in extramarital affairs, is deeply rooted particularly in middle-class and intellectual circles, this marriage became unusual in its honesty and mutuality. ‘Affairs’ became for both of them more casual, while dependence and trust became deeper.”12 O’Gorman did not write or talk explicitly about knowledge of Rivera’s indiscretions, although based on their relationship, we can assume that the architect was aware of potential marital impropriety. Suspicious of repeated indiscretions, in late 1934 Frida began to spy on Diego and learned that he was having an affair with her sister, Cristina. As a result of the emotional trauma she experienced, Frida moved out of La Casa Estudio into her own apartment on Avenida Insurgentes.

Even after they had moved to Kahlo’s childhood home, the Casa Azul, or Blue House, in nearby Coyoacán, in 1941, Rivera kept his studio in San Angel and maintained a strong attachment to the house, although from that point on Frida’s visits to the house-studio were much more infrequent. This is related to her knowledge of the model’s presence and the corresponding awkward visits, which she tried to avoid. It is ironic that the staunch Mexican nationalist would be so at home in such an international building. Perhaps Diego was drawn to functionalism because of its pretension of formal directness, which is linked to his strong feelings about this in painting. He disdained the academic method of copying without an understanding of space. Diego abhorred the pedantic, repressive artistic and architectural culture of Mexico, which had earlier characterized his own education and allowed the country to stagnate.13 The associations of La Casa Estudio with Diego and Frida are quite different. Whereas for Diego, it was a place in which his professional life – and sometimes his romantic life – flourished, for Frida, it was a house of pain. She associated betrayal, isolation, and physical inconveniences with that home, and O’Gorman could not have foreseen earlier her condition’s inevitable deterioration.

The partnership between Frida and Diego was a corollary to the artistic and intellectual climate of Mexico City which a pulsating social milieu represented. Indeed, this internationalism coupled with the allure of a localized Mexicanism distinguished the pair within their intellectual and cultural milieu, and added to their appeal. Thus, in their distance from Mexico, they were legitimized, but at the expense of that with which they identified.14 As Frida’s biographer Hayden Herrera explained:

What a pair they made! Kahlo, small and fierce, someone out of a Gabriel García Márquez novel, if you will; Rivera, huge and extravagant, straight out of Rabelais. They knew everybody it seemed. Trotsky was a friend, at least for a while, and so were Henry Ford
and Nelson Rockefeller, Dolores del Rio and Paulette Goddard. The Rivera home in Mexico City was a mecca for the international intelligentsia, from Pablo Neruda to André Breton and Sergei Eisenstein. Marcel Duchamp was Frida’s host in Paris, Isamu Noguchi her lover, and Miró, Kandinsky, and Tanguy were admirers. In New York she met Stieglitz and Georgia O’Keeffe, and in San Francisco she was photographed by Edward Weston and Imogen Cunningham.15

As much as Frida’s marriage to Diego cast her into the public’s view, his marriage to her cast him in a distinctly more complex light within the art world that was linked to his personal life. Unlike his earlier wives, Frida’s needs directly impacted Rivera’s workspace as well as design decisions. These were related to her unique physical limitations, as well as professional needs. Herself a painter and an intellectual in her own right, she too required a studio workspace.

La Casa Estudio de San Angel Inn

Soon after completing his studies in 1927, O’Gorman acquired a plot of land in the San Angel Inn neighborhood of Mexico City, named for a famed restaurant and an affiliated tennis club across the street, on which he initially designed and built the house for his parents. O’Gorman claimed that this was the first functionalist house in Mexico.16 On its completion in 1929, he asked Diego if he would see it and give his opinion. Diego immediately commissioned the 26-year-old architect to design a house-studio for him and a separate apartment for his bride, Frida, on the adjacent corner lot of Las Palmas and Altavista streets17 (Figure 12.1). The result is a house and studio that intercepted, deflected, and absorbed Mexico’s cultural undulations during this uniquely vibrant period. Between 1929 and 1932, O’Gorman designed and oversaw the construction of the homes and studios for his clients, and a small photographic studio for Frida’s father, Guillermo Kahlo, which Guillermo never used (Figures 12.2 and 12.3). For most of that period, the couple were in the United States for the completion of Diego’s commissioned works in San Francisco, Detroit, and New York.

One glimpse at La Casa Estudio and a range of simultaneously and multifariously expressed overt and subdued architectural qualities immediately strikes the visitor. Upon this first impression the building cluster expresses its balance of simple geometric pieces, which includes two intensely colored cubic buildings next to each other on the east–west edge of a corner lot. Herrera describes the home as “two sleek international-modern cubic shapes ‘Mexicanized’ by their colors (pink for Diego’s house; blue for Frida’s) and by the wall of organ cactus that surrounded them.”18 La Casa Estudio’s complexity extends to its landscape and ties into the country’s nationalist climate in its
12.1
Kahlo–Rivera house-studio, south elevation, July 31, 1932

12.2
Kahlo–Rivera house-studio, north elevation, 1931. Pencil on paper, 50 x 29.5 cm

12.3
Kahlo–Rivera house-studio, site plan
regional expression. The rock garden alludes to pre-Hispanic motifs within an otherwise constructivist composition, announcing a distinctly Mexican definition of functionalism, while the colors affirm their cultural affinities.\textsuperscript{19}

The building’s modernist forms imply a direct nod to Le Corbusier’s functionalist architectural language, and the potential austerity of an otherwise controlled exterior daringly reveals this architecture’s distinct response to the aesthetic treatment of surface and an acute awareness of its relationship to history. Its double-volume composition – at once separate yet conspicuously connected by the infrastructural accoutrements of modern buildings – prefigures and amplifies the doubling theme that runs throughout the project.\textsuperscript{20}

Traces of uneasiness are woven into the building’s ostensibly harmonious fabric of competing forces. The calm serenity of these “twin houses” belies the vigorous artistic and intellectual climate out of which it grew.

The site plan features separate houses, hinting only at the connective elements that bind the two parts. Each apartment can be reached either from an exterior stair on the ground floor under the building that winds up along a wall to the entrance or via the interconnections between them. Only on entering Diego’s apartment and circulating through the spiral stairways and narrow hallways, which subtly distinguish living from work and exhibition space, does the visitor experience the bridge joining them. Frida’s apartment is reached after moving through Diego’s, crossing the bridge, walking onto her wing’s roof terrace, and descending down a flight of thick concrete stairs precariously positioned against the building’s north-facing exterior wall. One’s awareness of the fine lines distributing mass, volume, material, and light is heightened by the tensions between whole and part, composition and detail. In the house-studio, concrete stairs, metal railing, colored walls, shadowed hallways that contrast with semi-open galleries, abundant glass set in metal frames, cool concrete, and warm wooden floors and the brick terrace act as additional artists’ canvases.

Reading the house-studio

In 1936, the American photographer, Esther Born, photographed the house-studio but did not include interior views, which were published in a 1937 issue of \textit{Architectural Record} that featured “New Architecture of Mexico.”\textsuperscript{21} By the time of Born’s visit, Frida had already moved out and was living in the \textit{Casa Azul}. Whether Kahlo’s absence is related to Born’s failure to shoot it from inside is not as relevant as how it informs questions about the implications for a space joined for two personalities. Born’s photographs do not identify how the space negotiates this ambiguity vis-à-vis the public and private life of an artist. The space emerges as a sort of theater, both as a site of self-definition and imagination, a retreat to the unconscious, as well as a site for display and performance, simultaneously a public and private theatrical stage for the lives
of two residents and many visitors. The photographs, however, raise the question of how the more visible corner lot of the two originally owned by O’Gorman would more effectively showcase functionalist architecture and deliberately draw attention to his clients.

In Spanish, the houses are often called las casas gemelas, or “twin houses,” which suggests that they are indistinguishable. Yet it is obvious that the two do not mirror each other: they are quite distinct. Kahlo’s apartment is secluded insofar as it is not located at the corner of the lot, limiting its prominence on the site. Whereas access to Rivera’s is clearly indicated by the large concrete spiral stairway, the entrance to Frida’s apartment is hidden, concealed under the main level in the dark or on the north side, behind the house and beyond street view. Visibility into her apartment is also less than Diego’s on the property’s private, north-facing side, away from the street. Diego’s apartment simply has more glazing. The compound’s south-facing side is conversely, more public – against the street, with an entry gate. However, this ostensible privacy is compromised on the public street façade where the flat wall that is punctuated by ribbon windows minimizes views into Diego’s space, while the south-facing side of Frida’s apartment is amply fenestrated, thus exposing her private space to the public. The compulsion to invoke twinness recalls the connotation of sameness in relation to reproducibility, which alludes to a desire to resolve a disruptive tension. This raises the question whether architecture can cure the ailments plaguing a partnership and, if so, how? It questions architecture’s capacity to influence the personal dynamic between two people or the intersections between personal interaction, and professional and creative productivity. La Casa Estudio was both expressive of this tension and the acknowledgment by O’Gorman of his clients’ distinctness.

Like the building’s exterior, the plan belies the complexity of the interior spaces’ experiential qualities. The unadorned, stripped bare exterior at one level is an architectural parallel of Kahlo’s otherwise highly ornamental clothes, which could be read as a screen. The cactus alludes to the barriers erected to bar entry to the house-studio. It, too, recalls the Mexico of masks, gestures, exaggeration, screens, and concealment of secrets. Here it is associated with the scandalous liaisons that characterized Rivera and Kahlo’s partnership. The cactus wall, however, is non-functional in that there is nothing beyond that it is concealing similar to conventional understanding of fences and homes. In contemporary Mexico City residences, for example, one would ordinarily expect to find an element that defines private spaces – the embodiment of domesticity beyond the wall. From the openness of the street one’s path would lead into a private enclosure. Here, however, one is teased by the appearance of a solid asbestos door that hardly manages to bar entry. While these taunting moves may be intentional, they draw attention to the minimal
foundation, which is characterized by ostensibly weak column supports and parallels the occupants’ relationship.

The interior is complex in its programmatic objectives to be a home, meeting and studio workspace, as well as its transformations due to its changing occupants and use over several years. Some basic changes led to the erosion of private and public spaces. Initially, slight modifications in living, entertainment and working spaces followed the developments in Frida and Diego’s lives. Others occurred over a longer duration in the architectural life of these buildings. Initially, the analogy of the buildings as bodies supported the notion that O’Gorman had considered them as symbols of the two individuals inhabiting them. However, this symbolism began to erode in Diego’s last years in which the alterations ranged from the filling in of the spaces between the ground-level free-standing columns, adding walls and colonial chimneys, to changing the original colors, all of which generally distorted the project’s original design.

Of particular interest is the distinct emphasis on photographic representation and the scarcity of contemporary drawings. A 1982 catalog of O’Gorman’s buildings includes photographs and descriptions of materials, and historical contexts and theoretical influences for the separate entries of the Kahlo and Rivera houses (1932). In addition, it contains information on the early homes for Ernesto Martinez de Alba (1928), O’Gorman’s father, Cecil (1929), and two houses for his brother, Edmundo (1931). None of the entries includes reproductions of the original drawings and there is not even a reproduction of a drawing of Frida’s house. As depicted in Born’s 1937 book, *The New Architecture in Mexico*, *La Casa Estudio* initially included separate studio wings for Diego and Frida, each with its own studio, bedrooms, and kitchens. Born’s drawings of the house-studio imply two completely independent apartments that were joined on the third level by terraces and a footbridge. Born provides separate descriptions for its two primary programmatic features. It includes a gallery for Diego’s pre-Columbian art collection, four bedrooms, two bathrooms, Diego’s studio and workshop with an exhibition space. The ground level featured a shaded sculpture garden and carport. The small house is described as containing a “living room, kitchen, bedroom, bathroom and a studio which can become two bedrooms, if necessary, with free entrance to each. Garage and laundry. Exterior walls painted bright blue, rose and deep earth red. All steelwork in orange vermilion.” The distinction between Rivera’s house and studio, and Kahlo’s wing is apparent in their size difference. Like Diego, his house appears massive and solid, dwarfing Kahlo’s apartment, and her seemingly delicate parts. This disproportionate distribution is given symbolic weight in consciously reducing the woman within the partnership.

Although there have been dramatic changes in the interior, Toyo Ito’s interest in the entire project and his 1997 drawings of the project help the
visitor to understand the sight lines and design that defined this dwelling. In Ito’s drawings, the kitchen that was once represented within Diego’s house is now gone, and there are fewer bedrooms.27 The individuality of each wing, their connectivity and interdependence, as well as the private spaces within a public one that contributed to the intimacy of La Casa Estudio erode over time. The domesticity of the house is compromised in favor of the stage set that the spaces comprise. As his models suggest, Ito’s interest is nonetheless the entire project – inside and out (Figure 12.4). His models and the interior photographs of Kahlo’s apartment reveal a transparency that one’s line of vision permits. Besides drawing in the voyeurism of the public to the house-studio, there is a pervasive sense of sight lines within the buildings’ interiors that heightens one’s sense of seeing, the formal relationships, and interaction between space and object.

Along with the staging, the house-studio’s ambiance promotes the open interior rather than the exterior, which consequently acquires meaning as the building’s most public component. Indeed, during the time that Diego and Frida occupied the San Angel house, it converted into a social center of the intellectual class of the country and abroad, and as the most important nucleus of that period’s distinct movements. Communists, Surrealists and other groups of philosophical thinkers, like great artists, had in this space a platform to discuss and debate their ideas.28
The exterior forms announce the building’s presence without directly referring to the frequent and equally raucous activities occurring inside. In her July 23, 1935 letter to Diego, Frida identifies “adventures without number, beatings on doors, imprecations, insults [mentadas de madres], international claims.” Diego’s studio was the most public part of the building, serving as a living room for guests, as well as the workspace of one of Mexico’s most well-known artists and public figures, showcasing both inanimate and live figures. From an interiorized perspective, La Casa Estudio was the location of the formation of individual subjectivity, while as an exteriorized forum it served to entertain guests, and to manufacture and promulgate ideological rhetoric and imagery. O’Gorman calls the buildings the “studio” and the “little house.” Herrera notes that such distinctions might have referred to the man’s apartment and his mistress’ domain, and that Diego’s architectural theories sustained licentiousness. The buildings present a spatial hierarchy in which Diego’s larger, more public wing asserts its dominance over Frida’s smaller, more intimate space (Figure 12.5). We can also interpret this characterization as an acknowledgment of the traditional servants’ quarters in middle- and upper-class Mexican homes. Here, the size discrepancy might be read as hierarchical arrangement that placed Frida in the subservient role of submissive wife/servant. Whether this was intentional is not as relevant as the notion that Diego was as much a product of the patriarchal social establishment of Mexico as he was of its more laudable liberal, progressive strains.

Ella Wolfe acknowledges Rivera’s role in the design of the double-cube home. Separate houses “seemed, from a bohemian point of view, the ‘interesting’ or ‘arresting’ thing to do.” On one occasion in 1931, Frida told
her friend Lucienne Bloch, daughter of the Swiss composer, Ernest Bloch, that she “liked the idea of having two separate houses: “I can work, and he can work.” The separate domestic identities reflect the couple’s physical, psychological, and emotional identities. The separation was kept taut by the bridge that connected them. As different, seemingly incompatible as the pair appears, the two were inseparable.

According to Herrera, “Frida once said that her paintings were like the photographs that her father did for calendar illustrations, only instead of painting outer reality, she painted the calendars that were inside her head.” Perhaps this metaphor applies to the architecture she inhabited, imagined, and influenced. In contrast to the interiority of Kahlo’s work, Rivera’s alludes to the visible, tactile, social, and public facets of life. Frida’s private interior can be construed as a defensive shield masquerading as alegría that protects her from the pain of which her marriage to Diego constantly supplied and made visible to the public. Her paintings recall anguish and correspond to interiority; the vehicle by which the mechanistic order of the house-studio could be undermined. Were the memories of distant lands the way to avert the present? In My Dress Hangs There of 1933, Frida visually alludes to the loneliness associated with the industrial city. The painting acquires its character primarily from the architecture. Frida depicts classical Greek architectural elements as fragments of her urban montage. Here, not even the dress – a mask – can protect her from isolation; it hangs listlessly from the fabric of Detroit.

La Casa Estudio was both public and private. It is well known that Frida’s space was also a hideaway for Diego and his lovers. Frida may very well have been aware of this, and her ability to tolerate the liaisons was constantly challenged. Although she was aware of Diego’s trysts, and on occasion compliant to the point of matching Diego’s indiscretions, she was nonetheless frustrated by Diego’s initial betrayal, forcing her to accept his behavior and eventually to return to the Blue House. The connections between the two volumes of their house-studio parallel the chasms between Frida and Diego, which she often expressed in her paintings. The notion of in-betweenness is directly related to the bridge that was a literal and metaphorical middle ground for them. It did not touch the ground, floating above the steps of everyday reality. Yet this is where Frida and Diego could most easily touch base – in the tentative space suspended above ground. While this space represented their recurrent separations, it embodied the bond that inevitably reunited them.

**Paired but not identical twins**

The predominant narrative of strife that defines Frida and Diego’s relationship has the tendency to privilege binary opposites in this examination, consequently obscuring the role of their shared intimacy and diminishing its complexity and the value of its effect on the architecture of La Casa Estudio.
If we take another look at the name of these houses in Spanish – *las casas gemelas* – we find that a not-so-literal translation and interpretation accounts for the partnership dynamic and attempts at mutual understanding, however naive, delusional, or doomed to failure. Here, the connotation of *gemelas* is more akin to “matching” than to “twin.” The idea is that for two things – objects, people, or buildings – to “fit” together, or match, they need not be identical, or similar in any obvious way. Rather, it suggests that very often two seemingly opposing forces in some ways complement each other quite well.

The violence and pain that was so much a part of Diego and Frida’s marriage can be extrapolated from the choices that were made in the design of their home together. In essence, their home represented the tensions between two distinct and determined individuals, each of whom had powerful personalities and goals. *La Casa Estudio* not only represents their so-called detached marriage, but the ever-present tensions between public and private life, between marital commitment and licentiousness, between modernity and tradition, and no less, between interiority and exteriority.

**Notes**

I gratefully acknowledge the generosity of Toyo Ito & Associates Architects, Tokyo, CONACULTA/INBA, Mexico, and the Banco de Mexico for permission to use images.


2 There are differing accounts about the years that *La Casa Estudio* was the couple’s home that reflect their break-ups and subsequent reunions. According to Herrera and Joseph Giovannini, the couple lived in the house studio between 1932 and 1939, while CONACULTA (Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes) cites the years between 1934 and 1941, when upon her father’s death, Frida moved back to the *Casa Azul* (the Blue House) in Coyoacán. Due to travel, the pair hardly lived in the house for the first two years after its construction, which accounts for the 1934 start date. Their 1939 divorce and 1940 remarriage explains the second discrepancy. Living in the Blue House facilitated Frida’s daily life, which was at that point substantially complicated by physical limitations. For further details, see Herrera, *Frida, a Biography of Frida Kahlo*, pp. 179–180; Joseph Giovannini, “Compound Sheds Light into Complex Relationship of Rivera, Kahlo,” *New York Times*, March 14, 1999; *Frida De Azul, Diego De Rosa Y El Amor a Través De Un Puente* (Frida in Blue, Diego in Pink, and Love Through a Bridge), Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1998. Online, available at www.cnca.gob.mx/cnca/nuevo/reporta/diego.html (accessed June 15, 2000).


4 Carlos Contreras writes that the period of most rapid growth has been since 1900 and more especially during the revolutionary period since 1910, chiefly through the inward flow of population from the states. Ester Born, *The New Architecture in Mexico*, New York: The Architectural Record, William Morrow, 1937, p. 4.
In the summer of 1931, Diego and Frida, “stayed in the blue house in Coyoacán while, with the money he had earned from American patrons, Rivera began to build their new home in the San Angel neighborhood of Mexico City, the home that was to be two houses linked by a bridge.” Herrera, *Frida, a Biography of Frida Kahlo*, p. 126.

Ibid., p. 194. This is distinct from the author’s description of Diego’s kitchen as the location of most of the couple’s meals.


Herrera, *Frida, a Biography of Frida Kahlo*, p. 192.


Herrera writes that “both houses belonged to Diego.” Herrera, *Frida, a Biography of Frida Kahlo*, p. 192. For a long time the house-studio was assumed to have belonged to Diego, since much of what is written about Frida is in relation to her residence at the Blue House. See *Frida De Azul, Diego De Rosa Y El Amor a Través De Un Puente* (*Frida in Blue, Diego in Pink, and Love Across a Bridge*). Urbiola writes that Frida’s apartment does not reflect her personality, as Diego’s does his. His world permeates his wing – his Judas figures, canvases, archaeological objects, furniture, etc. – expressing his personality. Urbiola, *Museo Estudio Diego Rivera*, pp. 9, 12.


O’Gorman recalled the day that Rivera invented his functionalist architectural theory: “Diego Rivera, at this moment, invented the theory that architecture carried out with the most scientific strict procedure of functionalism, is also a work of art. And since for the maximum efficiency and minimum cost they could realize with the same effort a greater number of constructions, it was of enormous importance for our country’s rapid reconstruction, therefore (according to master Rivera himself), it beautified the building. He immediately commissioned me to build him a studio and a house” (my translation). Arroyo, ed., *Juan O’Gorman: Autobiografía, Antología, Juicios Críticos Y Documentación Exhaustiva Sobre Su Obra*, p. 102.


Herrera, *Frida, a Biography of Frida Kahlo*, pp. x–xi.


Víctor Jiménez explains that, “in this house, not only the vangarde architectonic language was combined, but also parts of national culture. In this sense, it is necessary to stop at its colors, in which that period’s characteristic, ‘Mexicanized’ hues are imposed” (my translation).


Having read Vers une Architecture, O’Gorman was familiar with Le Corbusier’s House and Studio for Amédée Ozenfant (1923), published in Towards a New Architecture. After reading it, “it occurred to me that it was necessary to make a totally functional architecture in Mexico” (my translation). Arroy, ed., Juan O’Gorman: Autobiografía, Antología, Juicios Críticos Y Documentación Exhaustiva Sobre Su Obra, p. 94.


“Beyond the polemics, the houses, above all Diego’s because Frida’s was small and intimate, were the meeting place for politicians and famous celebrities from the ’30’s and ’40’s. André Breton, Leon Trotsky, John Dos Passos, Waldo Frank, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Dolores del Rio, and Lazaro Cardenas, among others passed through there” (my translation). Frida De Azul, Diego De Rosa Y El Amor a Través De Un Puente. Also see Herrera, Frida a Biography of Frida Kahlo, p. 195.

Diego lived in the house-studio until his death in 1957, and his daughters subsequently occupied the apartments and modified them. The house-studio was the residence of the artist, Rafael Coronel, in the 1970s, and in the 1980s it was bought by the federal government with the goal of restoring it and converting the buildings into their current purpose as a museum. In April 1981, the federal government acquired La Casa Estudio to be administered by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA). At that time, it was declared the Museo Estudio Diego Rivera and the future site of the Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo. In May 1986, INBA acquired the building from Coronel and Ruth Rivera who, as a married couple, had made changes to meet their needs but left the studio intact. The Museo Casa Estudio opened on December 16, 1986; its restoration was completed in March 1997 to reflect its original state as Diego and Frida’s house-studio, and it was declared a national artistic monument. The extent of restoration was great since Diego’s house became a museum, and Frida’s home was temporarily the site of the Centro Nacional de Investigaciones de las Artes Plásticas, and the elder Kahlo’s studio was an office and storeroom. At one point a third structure began to compete with O’Gorman’s paired buildings.

Marisol Aja notes that at the time, the former Kahlo wing was the house-studio of the painter, Rafael Coronel, although this still does not explain the absence of the building’s graphic documentation. Marisol Aja, “Juan O’Gorman,” in Apuntes Para La Historia Y Crítica De La Arquitectura Mexicana Del Siglo XX: 1900–1980 (Notes for the History and Criticism of Mexican Architecture of the Twentieth Century: 1900–1980), ed. Victor Jiménez, Cuadernos De Arquitectura Y Conservación De Patrimonio Artístico (Notebooks on Architecture and the


26 Ibid.


28 *Los Inmuebles Del Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera Y Frida Kahlo Fueron Declarados Monumento Artístico*. Also see Urbiola, *Museo Estudio Diego Rivera*, pp. 15–16 and *Frida De Azul, Diego De Rosa Y El Amor a Travers De Un Puente*.


31 Herrera, *Frida, a Biography of Frida Kahlo*, p. 179.

32 Ibid., p. 179.

33 Ibid., p. 156.

34 As Cardoza y Aragón, explained, “I have thought about them together, precisely, for each of them being what they are with such intensity. I remember them and associate their directions, because that way I remember Mexico better. The two walking hand in hand, without letting go and completely independent. Walking in opposite directions, to be able to find each other. It does not interest me if they find or not find each other. What interests me is that Frida is Frida and Diego is Diego. And both are Mexico. In contrasting them another Mexico emerges as genuine as in contemplating them separately. Frida, with a diamond work, scratches her time and leaves her profile unshaded. Frida is Frida, steel flower” (my translation). Luis Cardoza y Aragón, *Círculos Concéntricos* (Concentric Circles), vol. 38, Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico: Universidad Veracruzana, 1967, p. 77.


36 “Rivera and Kahlo . . .” Fuentes writes, “He paints the cavalcade of Mexican history, the endless, at times depressing, repetition of masks and gestures, comedy and tragedy. In his finest moments, something shines behind the plethora of figures and events, and that is a humble beauty, a perservering attachment to color, form, the land and its fruits, the sex and its bodies. But the internal equivalent of this bloody rupture of history is Frida’s domain.” Frida Kahlo, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*, New York, Mexico: H.N. Abrams; La Vaca Independiente S.A. de C.V., 1995, p. 9.

37 Alegría means joy in Spanish. “Thanks to Rivera’s mania for publicity, the Rivera marriage became part of the public domain; the couple’s every adventure, their loves, battles, and separations, were described in colorful detail by an avid press. They were called by their first names only. Everybody knew who Frida and Diego were: he was the greatest artist in the world; she was the sometimes rebellious priestess in his temple.” Herrera, *Frida, a Biography of Frida Kahlo*, p. xi.
Chapter 13

Looking at/in/from the Maison de Verre

Christopher Wilson

The iconic Maison de Verre, attributed to Pierre Chareau and Bernard Bijvoet (Paris, 1928–1932), has traditionally been analyzed in terms of its eponymous glass-block walls, its industrial aesthetic, its climate-control advancements, and/or the way that the house seems to be like one large piece of furniture. However, few commentators have critically discussed the two different programmatic parts of the building – gynecological office (ground floor) and private residence (upper floors) – and the visual relationships that are manifest within them.

Specifically, a “medical gaze” operates in the doctor’s office and a “domestic glance” is performed in the residence (in both cases, both literally and figuratively). These “scopic regimes” can be seen physically in the materiality of the building – imprinted into/onto the glass, steel, rubber, and aluminium of the Maison de Verre. It is the intention of this essay to reveal these imprints of the medical gaze and the domestic glance found in the three main material characteristics of the building: (1) its various levels of transparency; (2) its seemingly random space planning; and (3) its many moving partitions, walls, furniture, stairs, and even sanitary fittings.

In this way (by looking at, looking in and looking from the Maison de Verre), it is hoped that such an analysis can shed light onto the way that materiality and material decisions affect not only the construction of architecture, but also the constructions of architecture, be they visual, social, mental, or otherwise.
The gaze and the glance

While many authors have written on the topic of “looking” in the realms of art and architecture, I have constructed my description of the scopic regimes of the Maison de Verre first on the work of Norman Bryson who has defined “gaze” through its French equivalent:

The etymology of the word regard points to far more than the rudimentary act of looking: the prefix, with its implication of an act that is always repeated, already indicates an impatient pressure within vision, a persevering drive which looks outward with mistrust...

In this way, a gaze is not just a “looking,” but a repeated looking, again and again. Such a repeated looking, claims Bryson, acts as if it is in a race against time, attempting to document situations before they change, sometimes even in front of one’s own eyes. A gaze, then, although it may seem like harmless staring, is a violent action. It cuts through to get to the heart of matters, to the hidden layer(s) underneath it all.

Bryson continues by contrasting this notion of “gaze” with another type of looking, a “glance”:

[A] division separates the gaze, prolonged, contemplative, yet regarding the field of vision with a certain aloofness and disengagement, across a tranquil interval, from that of the glance, a furtive or sideways look whose attention is always elsewhere...

Whereas a gaze attempts to go beyond surface appearances, a glance is more superficial, not fully engaged with its subject, and almost even secretive. And, whereas a gaze is active and penetrating, a glance is passive and can easily be pushed in other directions. Lastly, while a gaze attempts to freeze time, a glance is unconcerned with time – that is, there is no difference between glancing at different times and no attempt to capture time before it passes.

The medical gaze

Building on Bryson’s definition of “the gaze” for the purposes of analyzing the Maison de Verre, I have adapted Michel Foucault’s term “clinical gaze” into “medical gaze.” As defined by Foucault in The Birth of the Clinic, a “clinical gaze” is a way of looking by modern doctors that appears to penetrate illusion to see an underlying reality – a belief that doctors have the power to see hidden truths waiting to be revealed. Like Bryson’s gaze, Foucault’s clinical gaze is not merely an intellectual exercise, it is a rigorous examination of a subject (a patient) – it is a concrete “looking” interested in concrete things:
The clinical gaze is not that of an intellectual eye that is able to perceive the unalterable purity of essences beneath phenomena. It is a gaze of the concrete sensibility, a gaze that travels from body to body, and whose trajectory is situated in the space of sensible manifestation. For the clinic, all truth is sensible truth.10

After an initial examination, the doctor makes a decision as to the cause of a patient’s symptoms, known as the diagnosis, and proposes a treatment to remedy the situation. In such a relationship, it is the doctor who is in control. The doctor is the one who looks at the patient and directs him/her where to go and what to do. The patient’s gaze is not of importance here. Although (s)he may be returning the doctor’s gaze, such a returned gaze is not a medical one. The patient is only the one being looked at – an object – and the doctor is the one doing the looking.

The domestic glance
In contrast to a medical gaze, a domestic glance is not a process that necessarily involves two people. It is a “looking” done by one person. This is not to say that other people are not involved in a domestic glance, just that they are not its defining characteristic. A domestic glance, as its name implies, involves the concepts of surveillance, privacy and social relations, all in relation to a domestic setting or living arrangements. Surveillance here refers both to “looking out” and also to “being looked at.” A domestic glance is a cursory look whose surveillance is minimal – a look more concerned with being looked at, more concerned with maintaining privacy. It is mostly interested in screening and protecting others’ looks from view.

As Christopher Reed has pointed out, domesticity is not something we normally associate with modern architecture, although they both share the same roots in capitalism, technological advancements, and enlightenment notions of individuality.11 Instead, as Beatriz Colomina has suggested, modern domestic interiors, like those of Adolf Loos, are not really lived but staged.12 They are stage-sets where actors act out a play or perform (in the “living” room) for the public, and then retire backstage, or “the back of the house,” to their real private lives.

The domestic glance maintains a hierarchy between a public “front of house” and a private “back of house”, protecting the privacy of the inhabitants while still allowing the public into the domestic realm. It literally screens the private areas from the public areas of a house, or reflects any unwanted views towards another location.

A house of glass
As indicated by contemporaneous commentaries on the building,13 the official name of the Maison de Verre is The Dalsace House, named after Chareau’s
clients Mr and Mrs Dalsace. Chareau had previously designed an apartment interior for these same clients ten years earlier, and was given this commission as a result of their satisfaction with that project.\textsuperscript{14}

The building’s nickname comes from the large glass-block living-room wall that faces a courtyard off the Rue St-Guillaume (Figure 13.1).\textsuperscript{15} However, while this wall is a major element of the building, it is the overall usage of glass on all the exterior walls that reveals the scopic regimes of “medical gaze” and “domestic glance.”

First, in the front façade, the transparency of the wall decreases from bottom to top. At ground level, the glass is, for the most part, transparent. There is a small area of glass blocks to the right of the entrance, but since they are set back from the main façade, they are not as perceivable as the large clear panels to the left. In addition, these glass blocks have clear glass “clerestory windows” above them. The upper level façade consists of the building’s famous glass-block living-room wall, held together in a $4 \times 6$-grid configuration. These blocks, however, are not clear but frosted (translucent). The topmost level of the construction is completely opaque because it is made
of masonry – it is part of the existing building under which Chareau’s project was inserted (Figure 13.2).

This gradual change of transparency of the courtyard façade can be seen as a direct reflection of the usage of the spaces behind each level. The ground floor, the most transparent, contains the doctor’s office where patients were received, examined, and operated on. An analogy between the clearness of this glass and the doctor’s revealing process of his “medical gaze” seems appropriate – as if the patient’s body could easily and clearly be read by the doctor and his gaze.

The upper levels of the house contain the public areas of the residential section, the living room and dining room. The translucent glass blocks utilized there create a wonderful diffused light in these areas during both the day and night since Chareau’s design also includes huge flood-lights in the entrance courtyard (Figure 13.1). Additionally, at night the living room acts like a stage set when seen from outside. This effect parallels Colomina’s comments that Adolf Loos’ domestic interiors were “a stage for the theatre of the family” (see note 12). Colomina also provides an uncanny parallel with the Maison de Verre by quoting Le Corbusier on Loos: “Loos told me one day: ‘A cultivated man does not look out of the window; his window is a ground glass; it is there only to let the light in, not to let the gaze pass through.’” 16 This courtyard façade is the Maison de Verre’s public face, the one facing the street. Unlike later modernist houses such as Philip Johnson’s Glass House (1949–1950) or Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House (1945–1951), it is not possible to see directly into the residential portion of the Maison de Verre because of the translucency of the glass blocks. Strangely, these famous glass blocks have been called
“lenses”, like the lens of a camera, despite the fact that they allow neither views in nor out.\textsuperscript{17} Instead, the public areas of the \textit{Maison de Verre} (living room and dining room) are oriented towards the inside, towards looking within, not without.

The uppermost level of the front façade is the most opaque because of the existing masonry wall construction left intact. This is explained by an elderly tenant who refused to move from her apartment, thereby forcing Chareau to build below her. Mr Dalsace described this old woman’s accommodation as “sordid,” implying a lack of cleanliness and, by extension, light.\textsuperscript{18} Sarah Wigglesworth has pointed out a dialectic between the young, clean, and fertile Mrs Dalsace and the old, dirty, and infertile lady who would not move from her accommodation.\textsuperscript{19}

On the back façade of the \textit{Maison de Verre}, which looks out onto a garden occupying approximately one-and-a-half of the area of the house itself, the ground floor and upper floors seem to be generally treated the same, consisting of the building’s famous translucent glass blocks periodically punctured with operable clear windows.

However, while it may appear that both floors are being treated the same, this is not the case. On the ground floor, the clear operable windows exist at standing eye-level, protecting the patient when she is sitting in the waiting room. When moving from the waiting room to the doctor’s consultation room, these clear panels stay at a constant height, despite a level change, also thereby protecting the patient’s identity from being seen from outside (Figure 13.3). The protection of the patient is reinforced in the design of the garden, in which landscaping prevents anyone from getting no closer than 4 meters to the building.\textsuperscript{20} It is as if only the doctor, and no one else, is allowed to look at the patient. There is a clear window at sitting eye-level in the doctor’s consultation room,\textsuperscript{21} but contemporaneous pictures of the house always show curtains drawn over these, again controlling “the view in.”

On the upper level containing bedrooms and bathrooms, there are also horizontal, operable, clear windows on this back façade. In this case, however, these windows are specifically for looking out. They are carefully placed at eye level to allow selected views of the garden. Even the lower portions of the balcony doors are filled-in with opaque metal panels rather than clear glass (see Figure 13.7), in order to provide a continuous horizontal strip of viewing-frames. This framing of the outside by these windows works in the same way that Colomina interprets Le Corbusier’s horizontal windows in his houses. Specifically, in describing the “periscope” effect of the Beistegui Apartment (1929–1931), Colomina remarks: “In framing the landscape, the house places the landscape into a system of categories. The house is a mechanism for classification. It collects views and, in doing so, classifies them. The house is a system for taking pictures.”\textsuperscript{22}
The courtyard façade of the *Maison de Verre*, then, being the building’s public face, can be seen as following the ideas of Adolph Loos – a ground glass not letting a gaze pass through; whereas the garden façade, being the building’s private face, can be seen as following the ideas of Le Corbusier – openings that frame the landscape (the back garden).

**A “cinematographic“ architecture?**

Paul Nelson, writing in 1933 on the topic of the *Maison de Verre* soon after it was completed, noted that:

A study in plan and section no longer affords the architect the means by which to fulfill and represent his requirements: the fourth dimension, time, intervenes. One must create spaces that have to be passed through in a relative lapse of time. One must feel the fourth dimension. This house in Rue St. Guillaume incites this sensation . . . The Chareau House is not immobile nor is it photographic; it is cinematographic. One must pass through the spaces in order to be able to appreciate them; another aspect by which it is connected to contemporary man.²³
Like most modernist buildings, the way one progresses through the *Maison de Verre* is quite “cinematographic” – like viewing a film with ever-changing images. However, this experience is very different for a patient visiting the doctor and the residents living their lives, a reflection of the building’s programmatic duality.

When experiencing the building as a patient, one must progress through a circuitous route to reach the doctor’s consultation room, and then be examined and operated on. First, the entrance from the courtyard is quite hidden: one must “slide” to the left of the previously mentioned clear glass panels, then immediately turn 90 degrees to the right to access the nurse’s reception room at the end of a corridor. From the reception room, the patient turns left to a waiting room, going down three steps. When called, the patient must then ascend back to the original entrance level, pass behind the reception room and proceed down a corridor to the doctor’s consultation room (Figure 13.3). From the consultation room, the patient then turns back on herself to the examination room and possibly completes this tortuous path by turning right into the operation room, almost back to where she started at the entrance (the room facing the courtyard with the high clear panels). This serpentine route is shown in Figure 13.4.

It is easy to see who is in control here: the doctor, not the patient. Dr Dalsace even has a little secret extra room above the reception area, technically on the residential level of the building, where he can hide before making an appearance in the consultation room. It is as if the patient must go through such a long-winded route in order to be reminded of the doctor’s authority. In addition, the process of the doctor’s “medical gaze” does not only involve his looking, but also his diagnosis and suggested treatment: the instructing of what to do, where to go, and how to do it.

Although the spaces on the ground floor are, as Nelson says, “passed through in a relative lapse of time,” his cinematographic description of the *Maison de Verre* does not accurately describe the experience of the doctor’s office. The person moving through the ground floor (the female patient) is not the spectator, but the spectacle itself. The person doing the looking (the doctor) is relatively stationary, and when he does move, it is in conjunction with the patient.

Nelson seems to describe more accurately the experience of the residential section of the *Maison de Verre*, which, like the doctor’s office, is also accessed from the courtyard entry. Before reaching the doctor’s reception area, however, an over-sized open-tread staircase connects the entry corridor with the lofty living room (Figure 13.6). Beyond the living room is a dining room and beyond that, behind a curved wall, Mrs Dalsace’s “sun room” or private space. Mr Dalsace’s private study, mostly accessed from below, forms an opaque back wall of the living room (Figure 13.5).
Ground-floor plan and the circuitous route of a patient's visit to Dr Dalsace
A mezzanine level contains a master bedroom and bath, and two smaller bedrooms with en-suite bath facilities (Figure 13.10).

Compared with the doctor’s office, there is a distinct lack of corridors in the residential areas. Instead, cellular spaces (bedrooms, bathrooms and private study rooms) open out onto large open-plan areas (living room and dining room). The closest thing to a corridor is the mezzanine access balcony. However, because of its view overlooking the living room, this is always described as a “gallery”, thereby acting very differently from the corridors on the ground level.

As a result of this lack of corridors, the predominant “viewing scheme” within the residential section of the Maison de Verre is from above to below – from the gallery/bedrooms down to the living room/dining room. The typical documentation of the interior of the house – a view down into the living room from above (Figure 13.6) – reinforces this. Such a viewing scheme, “the domestic glance,” works to maintain the individual family member’s privacy. The constant surveillance of the residential areas of the Maison de Verre is not so much about the control of a body as in the doctor’s office;

![Upper level plan of the Maison de Verre](image)
rather, it is about control of a viewer’s look in order not to upset the domestic construction – that is, whereas in the doctor’s office the looking is one-way (from doctor to patient), in the residential areas the looking is two ways, one of which is privileged (the private looking from above). The mezzanine spaces of the house are screened from view to maintain privacy as required, similar to the way that the living room translucent glass-blocks screen any view room from the street.

In this way, the residential areas of the Maison de Verre are more theatrical and active than Nelson’s passive cinematographic description portrays them. The living room can be seen as a stage, where visitors are allowed and on which the family drama and gender roles are acted out. The bedrooms and private study rooms, on the other hand, can be seen as a back-stage, where visitors are not allowed (at least not officially) and secret happenings can occur behind closed doors. The “domestic glance,” from the private areas to the public areas, is constructed to reinforce this.

**A moving building**

The Maison de Verre is an incredible collection of moving, sliding, opening, shifting and unfolding partitions, walls, staircases, furniture, and even sanitary fittings (Figures 13.7 and 13.10). In the doctor’s office, these moving elements...
function to watch, observe and survey the patient, ultimately controlling her, as has already been discussed in the analysis of the clinic’s space planning.

All the doors in the clinic area are opaque, as doors traditionally are, and open up only to allow passage of the patient. When proceeding from the waiting room to the consultation room (where the windows stay at a constant height, despite a level change), the patient can be viewed through a clear glass partition by the secretary who checks that she is going to where she should go (see the lower half of Figure 13.8). After consultation, the doctor can slide open a huge opaque panel behind the patient to reveal the examination room (Figure 13.9). In the examination room is a small changing area, not separate or private, within a round metal sliding partition, similar to the ones used to enter photography darkrooms. Lastly, to enter the operating room, the doctor must open a traditional opaque door. Again, it is the doctor who is in control of the patient’s movements, this time through the moving elements of the house.

As opposed to the doctor’s office, the residential portion of the Maison de Verre uses moving elements to screen, shield, defend, and generally protect from view. This process begins at the bottom of the main stair, the official entrance to the residential portion of the house, with a perforated aluminium screen that pivots to allow access. This screen is translucent, not
Mrs Dalsace’s “spying corner” over the corridor to Dr Dalsace’s consultation room. Notice the clear panels separating the ground floor corridor from the reception area.

Dr Dalsace’s consultation room, with full-height sliding panel to examination room.
opaque, and foreshadows the translucent glass-blocks in the living room above. In the living room, operable but opaque metal panels allow for ventilation of the space, without sacrificing the privacy achieved by the glass blocks. This space is filled with a multitude of operable and moving pieces of furniture, Chareau’s particular speciality. Tables, chairs, cupboards, screens, even a library ladder, can be folded open, closed shut, moved on wheels, and generally manipulated in terms of position, size, and orientation.

Upstairs on the mezzanine level, the cupboards between the bedrooms and the gallery overlooking the living room can be opened from both sides (see Figure 13.10), allowing a view down from the bedrooms, like a spy. The ultimate moving elements in the residential portion of the house are the bidets that are able to swivel in and out of position, pivoting around their waste pipes. Similar to the opening and moving furniture of the living room, such mobile furniture can be positioned as desired. Their unfixed nature suggests changing views controlled by the user, rather than fixed views that control the user (as in the doctor’s office on the ground floor).

13.10 Mezzanine level plan, showing bedrooms and upper part of living room
His and hers: conclusion
While it can be concluded from this discussion that the residential portion of the Maison de Verre, with its performative and theatrical domestic glance, was considered the domain of Mrs Dalsace and that the ground-floor doctor’s office, with its medical gaze implying Foucauldian themes of power and control, was the domain of Mr Dalsace, such a territorial split of the Maison de Verre along gender lines may not be as constricting as it first appears.

First, despite the relinquishing of Mrs Dalsace to the traditional domestic spaces of the living room and bedroom, she was freed from the domestic burden of cooking and cleaning through the usage of domestic help, who had their own wing containing a kitchen, laundry facilities and bedroom. As can be seen from its lack of discussion in this essay, the kitchen of the Maison de Verre is not an integral part of its design. Instead, it is relegated to the service wing and functions merely as a food-preparation area with direct connection to the dining room. Although the domestic help was probably the responsibility of Mrs Dalsace rather than her husband, she was freed from everyday household chores, a situation curiously more reminiscent of the nineteenth century rather than the twentieth.

Second, the individual private spaces of Mr and Mrs Dalsace, his study and her “sun room,” are located between the two domains of the house and mediate between them. Mr Dalsace’s study is physically on the same level as the living room, and although it can be accessed from the office level below, the wall that it shares with the living room is one large sliding panel which, when opened, allows the doctor to interact also with the stage of the living room, to use the living room in a semi-professional rather than a domestic manner.

Mrs Dalsace’s sun room is the one place over which she has total control. Unlike the rest of the residential section, its rear exterior wall is floor-to-ceiling clear glass, not framed views, and it is a cellular space with no visual connection to the open spaces. The sun room, however, does contain a fantastic moving element in the form of a “stair” or telescopic ladder, suspended from the master bedroom above (labeled as “Q” on Figure 13.5), which can be folded away like a trap door if desired. Sarah Wigglesworth has suggested that Mrs Dalsace, by controlling access to her private space in this way, blocking out even Mr Dalsace should she choose, was able to negotiate sexual relations between husband and wife. As part of the back-stage of the house, Mrs Dalsace’s sun room is inherently private. The difference is that Mrs Dalsace is in total control of her space, able to choose not to act out a gender role on the stage of the house should she wish.

Lastly, at the junction of Mrs Dalsace’s sun room and Dr Dalsace’s private study is a curious look-out or spying corner. Here, Mrs Dalsace is able to look down into the corridor that connects the doctor’s waiting room and
consultation room, thereby nullifying the previously mentioned privacy of that circulation space. However, this spy corner also affirms, along with the secretary’s clear glass partition, that while the patient cannot be seen from the outside, she is able to be liberally looked at from the inside (see Figure 13.8). Additionally, this spy corner is the one place of the Maison de Verre where the “domestic gaze” is not just about the looking of any inhabitant of the house, but specifically about Mrs Dalsace’s looking. Like the telescopic ladder in Mrs Dalsace’s sun room, this spy corner seems to be a liberating disjuncture between the two scopic regimes of the house, for it is here that Mrs Dalsace can opt out of the “domestic glance” and participate in the “medical gaze.”

In conclusion, by looking at, looking in, and looking from the Maison de Verre, it is possible not only to split the building into its two programmatic halves with inherent gender roles, but it is also possible to see the liberation of such roles where these two halves come together. This is as true for Mr Dalsace as it is for his wife.

Notes
This essay has its origins in a visit to the Maison de Verre in 1996 while attending the Architectural Association’s M.A. program in the Histories and Theories of Architecture. Earlier versions were written for “Visuality, Spatiality and Materiality,” a graduate elective at Middle East Technical University Department of Architecture, Ankara, Turkey, and for “The Body, Architecture and Healthcare” workshop of the 2003 Society of Architectural Historians’ Annual Conference in Denver, USA. I would like to thank Jan Birksted for the opportunity to participate in that workshop and Carla Yanni for her careful reading of that second draft.


5 One exception is Sarah Wigglesworth who provides a gendered reading of the doctor’s office, “building an analogy between the body of the woman who seeks to be cured by the gynaecologist, Dr Dalsace, and the ‘organism’ of the city which requires ‘purging’ by the actions of an architect” (Sarah Wigglesworth, “Maison de Verre: sections through an in-vitro conception,” The Journal of Architecture, vol. 3, Autumn 1998, pp. 263–286, p. 263). Her work is the basis of my reading of the doctor’s part of the building, with my own emphasis placed on “visuality” and “the medical gaze.”


8 Bryson, Vision and Painting, p. 93.

9 Ibid., p. 94.

10 Michel Foucault, The Birth of the Clinic, A.M. Sheridan, trans., London: Tavistock Publications, 1991, p. 120.


12 See the chapter entitled “Interiors” in Beatriz Colomina, Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994, particularly p. 252: “The house is a stage for the theater of the family, a place where people are born and live and die. Whereas a work of art, a painting, presents itself to a detached viewer as an object, the house is received as an environment, as a stage, in which the viewer is involved.”


14 Officially, Chareau was not an architect, but a “decorator” with formal training from the Paris École des Beaux Arts (1900–1908) and professional experience with the Decoration Department of the Paris branch of the English firm Waring & Gillow (1908–1914). Until the Maison de Verre, Chareau’s built work consisted only of apartment and office interiors, hotel lobbies, exposition installations, and individual pieces of furniture. Hence, the collaboration with Bernard Bijvoet, an architect, was probably in order to satisfy regulations requiring architects for construction. The only significant “architectural” project by Chareau after the Maison de Verre was a studio on Long Island, New York, for the painter Robert Motherwell (1946). For the complete life and career of Chareau, see Vellay and Frampton, Pierre Chareau.
The address of the *Maison de Verre* is 31 Rue St-Guillaume. It is located in the seventh arrondissement between Boulevard St-Germain and Rue de Grenelle (Metro: Sèvres-Babylone) and can be visited by appointment by writing to: A.P. Vellay-Dalsace, 31 Rue St-Guillaume, Paris 75007, France. A visit is highly recommended to fully understand the complex three-dimensionality of the building.


Frampton calls the glass blocks “lenses” (Frampton, “Maison de Verre”). Bauchet identifies them as “Nevada-type lenses” made by Saint Gobain, France (Bauchet, La Maison de Verre).


In all fairness, it is unclear whether or not Chareau also designed the landscaping of the *Maison de Verre*’s back garden. However, it is a true statement that the current state of the garden does not allow a close relationship with the building.

This window is actually the upper part of a set of doors to the garden (see Figure 13.4), which reinforces the doctor’s control over the patient in terms of being able to go outside – the only other method of accessing the garden is from a corridor adjacent to, but not obviously accessible to, the waiting room. See the upper extreme left of Figure 13.4.


The original French is: “Ce n’est plus une étude en plan et en coupe qui permettra à l’architecte de satisfaire ses exigences, mais la quatrième dimension, le temps, intervient. Il faut créer des espaces à parcourir dans un laps de temps relatif. Il faut sentir la quatrième dimension. Cette maison de la Rue Saint-Guillaume excite cette sensation . . . La maison de Chareau n’est pas immobile, ni photographique, elle est cinématographique. Il faut parcourir des espaces pour l’apprécier – autre point de liaison avec l’homme d’aujourd’hui.” The translation is from Frampton, “Maison de Verre,” p. 85.

Wigglesworth claims that this changing area has a mirrored ceiling, but I do not remember any mirror from my visit, and have been unable to verify this fact.

The servants’ wing is to the left when viewing the building from the courtyard (see Figure 13.1).

Although, as Hilde Heynen has reminded me, “refusing to have sex” is also scripted as a possible gender role.
Belgium has a long tradition of architects building private homes for individual clients. Over 60 percent of Belgians are home-owners and most of these own a detached house somewhere in a suburban neighborhood. These houses generally follow the well-known model of the suburban home with an ordinary plan (living room, kitchen, study, bedrooms, bathrooms, facilities) and a stereotypical site arrangement. Occasionally, however, one finds instances of serious architectural reflection that questions and rethinks the conventional set-up of a family home. Such is the case of Marie-José Van Hee’s dealings with domestic architecture.

One searches in vain, however, for a trace of a statement or a submission to a paradigm in her houses. It seems as if, in the hands of this designer, a coincidence of circumstances merely mutates into a unique dwelling – peculiar but recognizable, unpredictable but responsive, dwelling architecture as improvisation theater. The circumstances – clients, plot, budget, regulations – are not altered to fit the set-up of the designing master-mind. They are given their due and used as the unruly raw material for the design. A single intention seems to drive Van Hee’s designing skill: the exploration of every architectural possibility of the poetics of a dwelling. In doing so, she manages to create houses that offer hybrid spaces, intermediations and juxtapositions, which allow them to undermine conventional gender patterns.
The urban multiplicity as frame and substance of the design

Whereas most homes that appear in the architectural press are detached houses or villas, Van Hee’s work focuses on urban houses which admit to an *architectura della città*. Dwelling architecture as improvization theater fits the city as multiplicity.

A city is always a coincidence of circumstances, both plural and contradictory, coherent and heterogeneous, permanent and changeable, oppressive and emancipatory. The city can be seen as a metaphor for the societal condition. Over the last few decades, this multiple urban reality is caught in a true mutation. The city of stone is becoming a *città diffusa*, the polis a non-place urban realm. This mutation does not indicate the end of the city as such; rather, it results in an urban reality that is yet indefinable but one that implies larger social stakes, a wider scope, and a higher level of complexity.

Some celebrate this new urbanity as the “apotheosis of multiple choice” or as an inexhaustible grid of opportunities. Social criticism, on the other hand, emphasizes how the contemporary city is becoming a dual city where the emancipating and redistributing achievements of modernization are jeopardized. Social changing processes have indeed deepened and broadened urban multiplicity, but they have simultaneously installed a fundamental ambivalence in its condition, not only enhancing the opportunities for emancipation, but also retaining those for oppression and discrimination. There exists no single code capable of controlling the abundance of urban narratives. The city does not go by the name of the father only. It includes logocentric and phallocratic discourses and practices, but stands at the same time for the analogous, the mimetic, and the feminine. Within this urban multiplicity no praxis is fireproof against semantic shifts, nothing is immune to oppressive perversions of meaning, or to emancipatory resignifications. The multiplicity implies more than the commercial or cultural abundance of the city; it reaches beyond the subcultural and queer sides of urbanity, since it resides as well in the common and the ordinary. The city is an accumulation of “normal” places, where, hidden underneath daily life, unexpected meanings slumber at the edge of disappearance and reappearance. The multiplicity of daily life and its common-places offers a kind of raw material for the cultivation of non-oppressive and non-exclusive dwelling situations, a process that requires affinity, care, and creativity. This is what Van Hee’s domestic architecture is about.

House 1 (2000): a plural assignment

Van Hee designed a small city house in the inner city of Ghent. The plot of about 120 square meters is located in a compact residential area, close to the historical center but not within the shadows cast by the city monuments and their accompanying heritage industry. The street is at most 3 meters wide. This urban location and its surrounding urban fabric will charm any city stroller,
but history's patina appears barely able to hide the poor condition of some buildings. A splintered parcelling reduces private outdoor space to a courtyard or roof terrace. It is not easy to reach the house by car or to park a vehicle safely. Overcondensation blocks out elementary sunlight and denies every view. To build individually is expensive and even a large budget does not guarantee any quality. At this point, a pragmatic compromise comes to mind for most people. The dream of a house in the city makes way for the privacy of a house in the greenery of the suburbs. The inner city becomes merely a place for work, leisure, services, shopping, culture, and company. In spite of its multiplicity, the inner city thus shifts towards a dual condition: dilapidation and the formation of ghettos in some parts of the city, gentrification in favor of services, trade, and marketable real-estate in other parts. Given these circumstances, designing a house for city life becomes quite a task. It means laying claim to a non-dual, urban multiplicity, or even more, it means reappropriating a place for urban dwelling.

The budget was limited; the clients had no taste for expensive materials or “exclusive” design. Although a quantifiable brief was lacking, the clients did express some (explicit) demands and (implicit) desires.\(^5\) The couple – two men – wanted the house to be sober and tasteful, but at the same time homelike and comfortable. They did not want an average house. They wanted architecture, molded to their needs but at the same time self-evident, custom-designed, yet modest and built within the constraints of timing and budget. They also wanted a house that offered them rest and privacy as well as surprising twists, variety, and views, a house in which architecture acts as a sounding board for the city and the practice of living – private, but focused on its neighborhood “where children still play in the streets.”\(^6\) First of all, however, the design had to carve out a place in an insecure city, a place allowing for quality family life, a family life that would not fall into a fixed pattern. (Both men work outside the home and are looking to adopt one or more children.)

At this point the available typology of dwelling has to admit its shortcomings. The urban terraced house, the semi-detached house, or the patio house are unable to live up to these expectations. The architect cannot but invent a new kind of house, using the basic requirements of the assignment as a starting-point.

**The house–street relationship**

A great deal of designing energy is involved in house–street relationships that go beyond ringing the doorbell or peeking behind curtains. In principle, it is a terraced house that needs to be built on this plot. Mostly this comes down to a closed façade and a deep building volume that establishes a buffer between what is public and what is private, between a formal façade and an informal
rear. Van Hee’s design is different. It is based on two shallow building volumes, parallel to the street. These are extended and reduced, lifted, reshaped, and shifted until a strongly articulated “house–street relationship” emerges. A solid façade measuring half the width of the plot aligns with the street wall (Figure 14.1). Past this half-façade, a wide porch covers the remaining half of the plot. In the meantime, the façade folds back three times to make room for a walled front yard between the front door and the street. The first fold marks the front room. This room looks out on the street from a raised position. There is a wide pivot door in the second fold. Announced by the porch, accentuated by the fold but still receded to the front yard, the door can be left open without causing embarrassment or confusion. Past the second fold, a little further back, a kitchen window looks out on the front yard and the street. The kitchen window itself folds back beneath a covered passage that connects the front yard directly to a private courtyard behind the house. The covered passage allows for a bicycle shed and an informal way of entering and leaving the house. Arriving and leaving, being inside or outside of the house are unfolded to a rich gamma of possible dwelling acts through which several

14.1
House 1,
street façade
spatial articulations, actions, and intersubjective positions are related differently in each case. A game of distance, accessibility, openness, and visibility allow for a spatial negotiation of privacy between passers-by, inhabitants, and visitors, between men, women, and children: being neighborly in the front yard, waving to a passer-by while standing in the kitchen, knocking formally on the door or going informally around the back (Figure 14.2). The house–street relationship becomes a matter of mediation: thresholds allow for negotiation, the gaze can be requalified.

The front yard as an open space is not given a name or designated a specific function: it is front yard and drive at the same time, but is also a terrace, playground, a place for tinkering, carport, simultaneously connected to the street and the kitchen. Different design subtleties intensify spatial articulations and effects. The architect created an outdoor storage space inside the sidewall, in the space beneath the window of the front room – an example of homely performance, both simple and ingenious. Almost anything can be stored in this space: folding garden chairs, boots, tools, and an assortment of rubbish. The designer reveals herself as a talented domestic engineer.7

To Van Hee, a city house is not a capsule but a filter, its façade not a containing wall but a membrane. It is as if the house is tiptoeing, as if it tries to occupy the plot as little as possible with built volume to safeguard as much outdoor space for dwelling as possible. Where the façade recedes and the building depth decreases, the house becomes almost transparent. The open door, the ribbon window in the kitchen, the covered passage, all create
a slightly veiled transparency throughout the building volume, filtering looks and behavior in between the street, the front yard, the interior, and the dwelling courtyard.

The thin side of the building volume hardly touches the plot boundaries (Figure 14.2). The perimeter wall is always visible and shows the plot’s original length and width, being the smallest size of the urban grid. The weather-beaten wall defines the empty cocoon, the potential dwelling place. It is like a silent passo doble between old and new: the inside and the outside change and give way in the folds of the new façade; the old wall embraces and outlines dwelling place and dwelling size. What starts off as an act of appropriation or recapturing – reinstalling a place for a city house – results in a subtle interaction between the new house and the old urban fabric.

The plan: from hierarchy to homology
The design themes operating inside are similar to those shaping the house–street relationship. A second pivoting door forms, together with the large front door, an entrance lock that can be shut off. When both lock doors are open, the house emits a summery, almost rural, hospitality. When both panels are closed and the host makes them, one after the other, turn widely on their pivots, the visitor feels the house opening up like a protected cocoon. Both the doors and the lock enrich the available gradations of privacy (Figure 14.3).

The distribution of interior spaces displays a number of characteristics of the Raumplan. On the ground and first floors, around a central staircase, three living spaces smoothly unfold on various levels and with various ceiling heights. The staircase does not have a central or dominant position. Instead, it is separated into short flights of stairs that almost dissolve in the overflowing of the three living spaces. While there is no hierarchy between the rooms, there is a significant gradation of privacy. The visitor first enters the downstairs dining room; taking a seat at the table, they see a panoramic view of the weather-beaten walls of the courtyard. From the front room, they can choose either to join this living scene or keep themselves discreetly at a distance. Nevertheless, rather than a passive Loosian Zimmer der Dame, the front room is an active living space, study, playroom, and library. Past the front room, the staircase reaches the sitting room, which is conceived as a first-floor den. Higher up, individual privacy squarely gains the upper hand. The flowing movement of stairs and floors comes to an end. The staircase suddenly seems to disappear; hidden behind a partition that doubles the common wall, it splits into two separate wings, each leading to its own attic room.

The spatial organization of the house deconstructs the hierarchical scheme underlying conventional plans, but does not replace it with a juxtaposition of neutral spaces or an open plan. Rather, the design provides strongly different spaces with a contrast in privacy, dimensions, outlook,
14.3

House 1, plans
and position. The individuality of the spaces does not lessen their multifunctionality. Moreover, several spaces can interact in various ways. For example, sometimes two different spaces occupy a homologous position vis-à-vis a third space. Thus, both the kitchen and the front room “control” the front yard and the front door. Both have an equal relationship to the entrance lock. In addition, the kitchen is also a workshop, and the front room doubles as a study and playroom. In their turn, the dining room downstairs and the sitting room upstairs maintain a homologous relationship to the front room on the mezzanine floor. From the front room, one can choose whether or not to participate with the activities in the dining and sitting rooms. Both bedrooms, differing in dimensions and position, have an identical relationship to the communal parts of the house.

The design stimulates the intermediary role and the equal standing of the various dwelling activities and eliminates their categorization according to social or gender positions. Caring activities, odd jobs, intellectual labor, relaxation, or receiving visitors can no longer be defined as spaces with clear-cut gender connotations and corresponding positions in the design. For visitors, the spatial articulation not only supports a broad range of mediating interactions, but also spreads the mediating authority for all the occupants. Mediation can be initiated from the cycle shed, the kitchen counter, the dining table, the study, or the playroom. Thus, the house–street relationship escapes excessive control. A wide range of privacy nuances enables multiple performances of togetherness and isolation. Through the widened spectrum of privacy, the design counteracts both possible excesses that, in other family situations, could lead to a patronizing pattern. The private part of the spectrum inhibits an excessive internal openness and panoptical control, while the transparency of the ground floor prevents an exaggerated enclosure of the domestic atmosphere. In short, one can say that there is a strong connection between the specific symmetrical family situation of the clients and the design that puts freedom of choice and equality first. But even detached from the specific situation of the occupants, the design supports these qualities of inhabitability.

The gaze
Apart from the gradations of privacy and homology, the moving gaze of the inhabitant or visitor provides an important organizing principle of the design. A whole taxonomy of gazing is addressed and supported by the architecture. Inwards, the half-open arrangement of spaces discloses varying diaphragms in the movement between the entrance hall, the dining room, and the front room. Outwards, a wide array of window types allows for an astonishing multiplicity of urban vistas.

It is difficult for the visitor to avoid gazing at the views: the glass wall of the dining room immediately reveals the enclosed courtyard as a fully
fledged space of the house, thereby doubling the living space. At the same time, the gaze almost tangibly rebounds to the imposing courtyard walls, and both the empathic rhythm of the vertical window jambs and the contrast of color and texture correct the illusion of spatial continuity between inside and outside (Figure 14.4). The resulting impression is one of a dual interior, juxtaposed and encased in an unresolved or suspended architectural tension, at once horizontally united to an open, generous living scene, while being vertically segmented into a double skin of shelter and intimacy. Yet another form of tension is presented and then suspended in the design: the continuous wall and window sections open up the available space, while the urban overcondensation mercilessly narrows it down.

The tension is discharged in the sitting room on the first floor. The design reformulates the themes of the ground floor: a ribbon window on the rear elevation frames, without any vertical segmentation, an uninterrupted cut-out of the old wall surrounding the courtyard. Here, nothing seems to compensate for the rebounding of the gaze, except that this window turns a claustrophobic wall section into a decorative object, putting the wall on view, or even transforming the image or presentation of a condition of spatial enclosure into an illustration or representation of this condition (Figure 14.5). Yet the object of representation is most definitely present and therefore this mimetic manipulation occurs at the level of the imaginary, where nothing stands in the way of the simultaneity of presentation and representation.\(^8\)
A large sliding window in the side wall of the sitting room imposes this architectural treatment of the claustrophobic even further. The sliding window offers a lavish view of the rough brickwork of the sidewall that, less than a meter away, separates the house from the adjacent one. Is this a grotesque joke on the part of the designer or an absurd mistake by the building contractor? On closer inspection, this brickwork forms the inside of a small void, cut away in a redoubling of the common side wall, and cut out of the rear elevation, just above the passage from the forecourt to the courtyard. The winter sun penetrates deeply into the cut-out. The sliding window lets the sunlight, trapped in the void, into the sitting room. This unexpected light, in its turn, guides the gaze of inhabitants and visitors high and across, above walls and roofs, to a strip of clear sky. From all points of view, the brutally blocked view gains an unexpected depth. It makes the redoubling of the sidewall visible and gives an enriched depth back to the room. This duplication seems to aim at more than a play of light and space. The void also houses a flue and a spacious storeroom, which can be stocked with firewood from a passage on the ground floor. In the sitting room, a turning wall, next to the wood-burning stove, will allow for access to the wood when needed. The residual heat from the chimney dries the wood in the storeroom.

The third window in the sitting room offers the denouement of this theater of spatial discord – gaze versus screen, openness versus enclosure, presentation versus representation. Across the forecourt, the street, and the opposite neighbors, the densely built horizon seems to temporarily open out. The design avidly plays along with this. A corner window greedily absorbs all available sun and views. The liberated gaze momentarily reaches beyond the confines of the city. Upstairs, in the attic rooms, the claustrophobic tension
seems to have disappeared completely. A deep cut is inserted into both the front and the back façades, right under the cornice. To those present in these rooms, preferably in bed, the vertical rhythm of this horizontal band of windows joins together a panorama of roofs and towers. The depth of the cut points the gaze towards the horizon, where it can drift along with the clouds undisturbed.

The architecture of Van Hee engages in a play with the gaze. Gazes are allowed, attracted, guided, confused, reflected, captured, liberated. In turn, gazes contemplate a condition, seek a way out, drift away, oscillate between contradictory terms, suspend an articulation, harbor a promise. These gazes are never annoying: looking in from and to the neighbors is carefully avoided. The gaze never acquires a spying or panoptical function. The sly gaze is absent, as is the hierarchical gaze. The controlling gaze from the kitchen counter cannot withdraw itself from the return gaze of the passerby. The panoramic gaze from the attic room floats away over the city, and has nothing in common with the overseeing or looking down from a position of domination.

Towards another architecture of domesticity

Is the small terraced house in Ghent an “other” house? Are there aspects in the approach to design which point towards a fundamentally different design method? Do the design and the design method show signs of a different gender sensibility? Neither the architect nor the clients are willing to answer such questions. This is unnecessary in any case, since the architecture itself can be examined in terms of its spatial possibilities and limitations. Spatial articulations can be analyzed as either supporting or inhibiting specific dwelling acts. Thus, the nuanced house–street relationship, the enlarged privacy gradient, and the homology and multifunctionality of various spaces in the small terraced house can be viewed as a spatial structure that offers multiplicity, mediation, equality, and freedom of choice, and which therefore is at odds with a standardized, hierarchical, and functionalist plan with its implied gender patterns.

There is a remarkable interplay between a modest brief and a big effort. The brief itself – clients, program, site, and budget – is never neglected. It remains the point of departure and the touchstone of the design. Nevertheless, this limited brief also operates within a much wider point of view. The design can be seen as a local act of resistance against an exclusive civilization, a polarizing society, against inescapable market requirements, generic urbanity, general placelessness – an act of resistance with a limited impact yet high capacity for the creation of place. In order to achieve this, intense design work is needed, both pragmatically and poetically – pragmatically because the design interacts discursively with the real preconditions of the brief and the actual available urban space, without losing itself in heroic architectural stunts; poetically because the design does not use architectural
templates, but rather comes up with an atypical plan for an atypical family on an atypical site. Pragmatism here is not an alibi for a poetical whim, as is proven by the intense work on day-to-day domestic performance. The visual treatment of the enclosed plot exemplifies a beautiful interplay between pragmatism and poetry: instead of negating the enclosure, it is observed and commented on in various ways in the design. Thus, the claustrophobic character of the plot is dealt with and transcended. Contradictions between the spatial reality and the desire for space are acknowledged in the design, then negated and reaffirmed until these contradictions are suspended in a vulnerable yet dependable synthesis.

In order to fulfill the demanding programme of such a modest brief and take to heart the latent stake inherent to it, Van Hee appeals both to the urban multiplicity as a starting material and to the urban spatial syntax. Every glimpse of usable qualities of the surroundings – a wall, a rhythm, a view – is drawn on to transform a small enclosed plot into a receptive frame. The house becomes a multiple carrier of living: an interplay of spaces and spatial relationships, a collection of performing places and facilities, a gradation of privacy, a range of dwelling acts, a spectrum of views, a taxonomy of gazes. The morphology of the plan is one of connection, disclosure, transition, overlap, juxtaposition, redoubling. The spatial effects aim for tension, mediation, multiple use, equality, freedom of choice.

Appealing to urban multiplicity does not result in a heterogeneous collection of shapes and solutions. The aesthetic signature and the typological substructure mean that the design never becomes a collage of objets trouvés. The management of the type is typical for the architecture of Van Hee: typological inspiration guarantees coherence and familiarity; typological transformation realizes a condensation and shift of meaning. The house is at the same time a terraced house and a house with a patio, a terraced house and a semi-detached house, a house with a street façade and a house with a forecourt. It combines mezzanine living and ground-floor living, open plan and closed plan. Where, in principle, typology entails a mental activity of designation, partition, and rational comparison, here we find ambivalence, fusion, and mutation.

Typological fusion and ambivalence realize a deconstruction of hierarchy and classification. Multiple use and redoubling of spaces or equipment have a similar effect. The play–work–study room at the front goes against fixed role patterns. Two yards, two living rooms facilitate polyvalence and improvisation. The simultaneous presence of opposites, both evoking and renouncing tension – the juxtaposition of the courtyard and the dining room, the interplay of large sizes and small spaces – can be regarded as a facet of this design method. The result is a hybrid and negotiable space.

With all this typological fusion, multiplicity, and redoubling, the designs risks architectural indigestion. There is, however, none because with
Van Hee the reality of actual living is never outdone by the architecture. The dwelling subject, the occupant who acts, takes their place, moves, and looks, is an important modus operandi of the design. This means that the designer designs as a corporeal dwelling subject, with both a knowledge of architecture and of dwelling. She imagines the needs, demands, and desires of the client-inhabitants. She does not act from a bird’s-eye view nor from the autonomous will of the master-designer, but from eye level and as an imaginary co-inhabitant. Nevertheless, this does not inhibit her from having full control over the design as an expert craftswoman and headstrong artist.

Another, metaphorical, form of corporeality is present in Van Hee’s domestic architecture. The new house in its urban environment can be likened to a character in the city, an individual between passers-by, a lady in the street – self-assured, yet not arrogant; natural, yet not ordinary; remarkable, yet not eye-catching. In spite of its specific design method and unusual spatial structure, the small terraced house in Ghent exudes a remarkable naturalness. It stands out for being different. In the scene of the street, the new house is completely atypical. It lacks picturesque imitation and looks unmistakably modern, yet it fits into the fabric of the neighborhood. Its height is equal to its neighbors’ and it would be possible to walk straight past the discrete façade. The porch to the forecourt mimics the dimensions of the garage next door. While this “other” house does not disappear into the commonplace, neither does it show any need to distance itself from it.

In current domestic architecture, normative, hierarchical, exclusive, and patronizing tendencies still prevail. This is true both for private houses and social housing schemes. In the better class of architecture these tendencies are often veiled and beautifully packaged, but they are never really taken out of the equation. Van Hee’s design method unmistakably aims at something else: other spaces, another domesticity. Its characteristics are close to what is called “a feminine space” in recent feminist literature, the result of a feminine semiosis.9 This kind of gendered interpretation nevertheless cannot escape a dual schematization: against the logocentric, fallocratic, exclusive, normative, productive, masculine space, it proposes a multiple, flexible, potential, receptive, reproductive feminine space. This schematization is hard to avoid as long as feminist thinking has to combat the silent oppression of conventional gender patterns. Dual ideological schemes do have the advantage of political efficiency. Van Hee’s domestic architecture, however, suggests a slightly different viewpoint. Multiplicity, ambivalence, poetical pragmatism, typological fusion, and redoubling point towards a hybrid rather than a feminine space. In this hybrid space, the equivalent juxtaposition, intermediation, suspension, and reformulation of opposites are at work. In such a space, one cannot recognize feminine semiosis taking over from masculine semiosis; rather, emancipating complements emerge, transforming patterns of oppression into patterns of liberation.
House 2 (1993): needs, demands, and desires

Although limited again to the scale of an individual house, the assignment in Wemmel – a municipality in the periphery of Brussels – was demanding from the start. The clients asked the architect to design an attractive and spacious pharmacy with additional laboratory, right on the corner of two streets with an ample urban residence above. This residence was to be connected to the upper stories of the adjoining house, but it had to be possible to separate it if necessary at a later stage. The adjoining house comprised the old pharmacy that would be converted into a paramedical specialist shop. The multiplicity of dwelling needs contrasted with the less inspiring character of the building lot. Although a corner-plot may be the archetypal position for a store, it is the most problematical spot on any street. Because of its position, a corner house lacks considerable outdoor space. Moreover, the specific plot for the new pharmacy originated from the merging of two small corner lots with a different morphological orientation: the former in one street, the latter in another. To complicate matters further, the site is located in the amorphous periphery of the city, where contextual qualities are scarce. Across the street, an anonymous apartment block is sufficiently withdrawn behind a patch of grass to leave a little southern sun. On the opposite corner, an impressive lime tree saves the spot from utter banality.

The clients were not sure of themselves. The woman client – pharmacist and main promoter of the project – doubted that the design would be capable of catering to her very strict demands. It was extremely important for her that the design would guarantee an easy connection between the spaces of work and living, whereas the professional sphere was to be severed spatially and mentally from the domestic sphere. This demand veiled another, even more profound contradiction. The woman client perceived her choice for this location as rational rather than emotional. Her professional situation created the need for the proximity of home and work, whereas the stress she associated with her work created the desire to live elsewhere. This desire seemed to be captured by her ideal of a villa set in the midst of nature, where she could retreat to a green environment, far from the city and the professional sphere. Perhaps even more than the solution of difficult programmatic or typological problems, the clients expected the design to cope with this contradictory condition, or at least the new house should make them come to terms with a choice of dwelling that was at odds with a consecrated ideal and a silent desire. To Van Hee all these needs, demands, and desires – typological, programmatic, and existential dilemmas included – are elements of the assignment.

Distance and proximity

Although the central demand sounded simple, it was complex. The relationship between work and home spaces had to be immediate yet distanced. The
design solution illustrates how Van Hee, possibly from her own experience, felt her clients’ dilemma and empathized with it. In fact, three different trajectories and three stairs link the pharmacy to the dwelling (Figure 14.6). None of these trajectories offers a fluent or spatially expressive relation. The smoothest connection runs through the stairwell of the old house. This stairwell functions as a lock between the two separate spheres. The other two trajectories are, in fact, bypasses through the garden or through the garage.

Two other elements add further nuances to this spatial chess game. The new house has its own front door, with a hallway and cloakroom, located as far as possible from the pharmacy, at the corner of the plot, on another street, and at another address. Visitors enter without being aware of the proximity of the

14.6
House 2,
plans
pharmacy. On the other hand, the pharmacy receives generous light from a skylight that protrudes into the roof terrace, the “outdoor room” of the new house. This skylight ensures a visual link through which light and movement in the pharmacy downstairs remain discernible from the house upstairs.

The design provides a plausible answer to a contradictory architectural demand. There is no real mediation; the dilemma does not disappear and there is no new reality resulting from the spatial tension between two counterparts. The contradiction implied in the multiple roles of the client – pharmacist, wife, mother – provides a discord that architecture cannot solve. The design merely recognizes and treats the problem, making it viable.

**Here and elsewhere, the middle is situated at the edge**

The essence of the design is an empty space, a room without a roof. On the corner of the plot, on the first floor on top of the new pharmacy, Van Hee designed a spacious walled outdoor room (Figure 14.7). The outdoor room is connected directly to the existing house above the old pharmacy by a porch and a door, whereas windows on the landing and on the stairwell allow for visual contact. At the same time, different oblong spaces – a gallery, corridor, balcony – left open in the margin of the redoubled façade and the common wall, direct gaze and movement away from the newly built structure towards the outdoor room. The impossible corner thus becomes the center of the house, a real patio, stressing the middle while situated at the edge, an eccentric center. More than the front yard of House 1, this outdoor room is indefinable. It is an architectural place without a name, a typological hybrid: at the same time it is balcony, terrace, and inner courtyard, all assembled in one simple rectangular space (Figure 14.8). Through this typological fusion, Van Hee’s design solves two problems at once. The eccentric center as negotiating
space, as a strong third term, connects the old and the new house both pro-
grammatically and spatially. This architectonic clearing of the corner creates a
“positive” open space in a place where this is typologically the least evident
and where the morphology of the street block is susceptible to “negative”
vacancy.

Van Hee turns the outdoor room into the largest room of the house.
Spoiled by the western sun, close to the kitchen and directly connected to the
living room of the old property and the dining room of the new house, this
makes for a very comfortable and inhabitable room. One can immediately
imagine innumerable dwelling scenes or family pictures with this room as a
background, tinted by the changing seasons. Furthermore, the significance
of this room goes beyond its programmed and typological performance. There
are five window openings in the room-high wall. Two of them capture the
western sunlight, bathing the view over the wind-blown suburbs; the other
windows capture the southern sun during wintertime and frame the lime tree
in a triptych (Figure 14.9). It seems that this new house still has to come to
terms with its surroundings, as if it wants to protect itself against an overdose
of the suburb while getting used to it. Here, dwelling involves settling down
and acquiring habits that allow the occupants’ to come to terms with an
uneasy situation.

Still there is something about this empty corner. The typological
fusion does not result in a self-evident architecture that seamlessly merges
into the street scene. The façade with the empty windows continues all
around the corner, covering the new volume. There the outside wall is doubled
to make way for a gallery that connects the newly built part of the house with
the eccentric outdoor room. In the outer shell another series of five empty
window openings is carved out (Figure 14.10). The inner one traces a core that— as a house within a house— collects most rooms and rises above the façade with the empty windows. The actual windows in the inner skin are not aligned with the five empty window openings in the outer wall. The difference between the vertical rhythms of both walls emphasizes the phase shift between both skins, allowing reading the outer wall as being the mask, the inner wall as being the face behind it.

Skin and mask belong to different sets of signifiers but are susceptible to a similar semiotic effect. They are figures of redoubling and opacity rather than of deception. Both emanate from the difference between what is visible and what is hidden. The tension between the terms of this difference generates several interpretations. Does this hard skin protect a cherished interior? Is the mask more significant than the face? Do the skin and the mask represent the reality of the suburbs, and does the hidden core represent the dwelling where one retreats? Or— and this would fit the demand— do the outlines of one house hide the desire for another one?

Other remarkable things are going on in the new corner house. To the passer-by, the pharmacy downstairs represents a local condensing of urbanity: illuminated advertising, goods, transactions, people, small talk, distant solidarity. Of the dwelling one would expect to see above the pharmacy, nothing is visible but the vacant roofless room and the empty window openings. The contrast between the familiar presence of urbanity downstairs
and the absence of a familiar upstairs hits the eye of the passer-by. If the empty corner on the first floor is obviously no bel étage, what else could it be? An unfinished construction site? A walled balcony?

For the inhabitants, afraid that the proximity of working and living they asked for would not leave any opportunity for a beautiful and private outdoor space, the outdoor room is as an unexpected gift. But it remains a room, not a garden in which they can go for a walk. Two windows show a patch of grass on the other side of the street; three others show a beautiful but framed tree. The empty corner and the mask are ambivalent figures: sometimes of mediation, sometimes of distance. A layer of Unheimlichkeit was from the start inherent to the choice of dwelling that the inhabitants made and the house on the corner reflects this. The architectural inventions help out, dose, negotiate, but cannot annihilate an irreducible rest. Van Hee’s design provides no illusionary answer to the dilemma of living here or elsewhere. This dilemma is part of the dwelling desire and therefore cannot be represented. The architecture does give shape to a fundamentally hybrid space, offering the programmatic, typological, and spatial means to handle this desire.

**The home plan amended: redoubling and half-grid**

In the plan of the house with pharmacy redoubling plays an important role. One wall becomes two walls, the poché in-between opens interesting possibilities for horizontal and vertical circulation, for screen and depth effects, for portals and alcoves, for the placing of storage space and sanitary fittings. One flight of stairs becomes two staircases that enable different relationships between the diverse atmospheres of the house.
It is not easy to discover a specific template in the resulting plan. If, post factum, one can be found in the background, it would be that of a half-grid. Half-grids are hybrid patterns of organization. They combine the characteristics of a tree structure with those of a neutral grid. The tree structure hierarchizes and links elements that show a distinct individuality and have a fixed place in the whole. The neutral grid, on the other hand, provides free trajectory choices between elements that are seen as equal but that miss identity. The half-grid allows for both singular and plural connections between elements with a distinct individuality or with differing hierarchical positions.

The plan as half-grid pays attention to rooms as well as to circulation areas; it combines fluent, often plural trajectories with places that emanate a strong spatial integrity. Through the method of redoubling, destinations within the house can often be reached via various trajectories. Some destinations, on the other hand, can only be accessed via a single sequence of spaces. The distinction between trajectory and living space seldom disappears, however. Everywhere in the house, the inhabitant or visitor is in the direct vicinity of a room that, through its individuality, invites you to stay. At the same time, everywhere multiple trajectories are an invitation to roam around the house. The half-grid and redoubling are design patterns that produce hybrid space. They support a set-up where standardization, hierarchy, and domination can be contested and amended, while juxtaposition, mediation, and synthesis find a suitable habitat.

The mimetic faculty

Certain aspects of Van Hee’s designing method witness her mimetic faculty. The term in this case refers to different forms of mimesis in which the designer acts as a virtual resident. Every dwelling act and its required equipment is tested and adapted through virtual dwelling. This is not restricted to the fine-tuning of the functional performance, but extends to spatial effects and the physical relation between body, gaze, and architecture. In fact, this process reconciles two mimetic points of view: the director-designer’s and the actor-residents’. The designer simultaneously “acts” and “directs” the dwelling scenes, while its architecture does not yet have a fixed form. In this double movement the spatial articulation acquires its “morphe” through performance and repetition. Such a mimetic process often grants the design an explicit theatrical character. Van Hee combines this mimetic faculty with a sense of empathy that enables her to grasp and present the less obvious dwelling demands and desires of her clients in the design process.

Mimesis is not a creation ab ovo, the design does not emerge out of the blue. The mimetic process combines imitation with transformation. During the performance the play changes. Mimetic design starts with familiar material, programs and design fragments, dwelling and designing experiences,
typological characteristics. The imitation and subsequent transformation of typological features is a mimetic procedure that is not limited to architectural tendencies such as neorationalism. Van Hee declares little interest in such tendencies but nevertheless incorporates strong typological configurations in many of her designs, fully exploring the tension between imitation and transformation. One of the richest typological configurations reused by her is the patio or courtyard. In some cases – as in House 3, for instance – the desire to intensify the dwelling experience results in an almost archetypical integrity. At other times she exchanges typological purity for a more typological impact. The patio then becomes front yard, terrace or outdoor room.14

Typological repetition is connected to another register of mimesis: the references to work by other architects. The architectural culture of Van Hee includes names such as Loos, Barragan, Van Der Laan, Grassi, Wright, Schindler, Mackintosh, Greene & Greene, Gray. The spatial complexity of Van Hee’s designs refers to Loos. On the other hand, Van Hee prefers “Latin lightness” to the Viennese contrary mood; she allows for improvisation where Loos is rather heavy-handed in his direction of movements, positions, and gazes. Van Hee’s awareness of the play of light and the subtleties she provides in opening and enclosing spaces (which are never completely revealed) remind one of Barragan and his “scenography of the wall.” The fascination for large and quiet open spaces connects her with Van Der Laan, as does the typological inspiration derived from archetypal forms such as the cloister.

In all these registers of the mimetic faculty one recognizes a performative and a referential dimension. Virtual dwelling and designing performance of dwelling scenes reinforce the performative aspect of the design. Once they are built, the designers’ intentions become “inhabitable”; they are integrated into daily life. The more performing the concrete dwelling happens to be, the more the abstract meanings the design performs become vividly represented. Typological repetition and the references to other architects support a referential dimension. Their diversity enlarges the semantical reach of architecture. Apparently, in mimetic design there still exists a difference between performance and what is being performed. One could say that this difference is alternately focused and then denied through the interplay between performative and referential dimension.

**House 3 (1997): archetypical dwelling scenes as innovating gestures**

In the inner city of Ghent, not far from House 1, Van Hee built a house for herself and her husband. They bought four terraced houses in a little street in a densely populated residential area. On the united plot Van Hee realized a large L-form surrounding a courtyard, leaving enough room at the back for a considerable garden. The grey washed façade, sober but obstinate, fits the
street scene seamlessly. Five windows carved out high in the façade do not allow anyone to look in, but illuminate the street at night. Under the cornice runs a ribbon window stretching across the length of the façade. The deep cornice tempers the authentic modernity that such a fenêtre en longeur evokes and repeats the height of the adjoining houses.

One almost barges into the house. A living room at double height occupies completely the ground floor on the street side. Above the closets with their sober panelling, there are deep window niches punctuated by heavy wall dams. This grants the façade thickness and depth, creating a sheltered feeling. The high position of the windows in the front façade denies the house a view onto the street, but it also seems to pull closer the attic windows and cornices of the building on the opposite site of the street. On the other side of the living room, three door-windows lead to the courtyard. The visitor falls silent. Is this a house? Within the residential area of the city center the living room appears to be a space beyond categorization, vaguely reminiscent of a monastery hall (Figure 14.11).

On entering, the visitor immediately stands by the fireplace. The house needs no explicit transition between the street and the interior; it does not need to adapt to the city or the visitor who takes his appropriate place in the house, not in a formal drawing room or an informal kitchen setting, but seated at the long table in the living room. This table, which always covered with books, is set timelessly for whoever passes by. Table and room seem to be designed for each other. The room has something extraordinary, something
elevated; the table adds hospitality and conviviality. Briefly, the visitor becomes a table companion. Although sitting around a table is staged as an archetypal dwelling scene, there is nothing archaic about it, nor is it fashionable minimalism. This dwelling act contests a lot of contemporary domestic rituals. The table is occupied by what this house is occupied with. The full table in the middle of the empty living room turns inside out the scenography of the conventional Flemish living room, which normally keeps the middle free and the margins filled with furniture, ornaments, and audio-visual equipment. The table fills the empty space and installs a platform for interaction between inhabitant and visitor. The archetypal dwelling scene, depleted of its hierarchical and normative characteristics, becomes an innovating dwelling gesture.15

Beyond the archetype, the counter-form
The courtyard is a square, walled-in space; two high garden walls surround the west and south sides, two wings of the house the northern and the eastern sides (Figure 14.12). Next to both volumes of the house runs a covered passage, which is wide next to the living room and narrow next to the other wing with kitchen and bathroom. The roof above the passage rests on concrete columns. Almost thirty rears ago Van Hee planted a robinia in the backyard of one of the four plots that are now unified. Its crown now dominates the sky. Next to the tree a little basin serves as a compositional counterweight. The tree and the basin are part of the archetypology of the courtyard – at least until recently, when a summer storm proved too much for the old tree. The passage is situated a few steps below the actual yard and reminds as much of a monastery’s cloister as of an Indian veranda. It is an open indoors as well as an enclosed outdoors, a mediating space that
is appropriate for all kinds of dwelling activities (Figure 14.13). On its brick enclosure one lingers in the midst of vases, hives, and cats. Much more than the living room, the courtyard appears to be the indisputable center of the house. From there one catches a glimpse of all activities downstairs, all parts of the house open onto it and most shortcuts run through it. Could this be called the archetypal patio? It is Andalusia in the inner city of Ghent? Not really, because the status of this courtyard is not so unequivocal. There is still the actual garden. Hidden behind the southern wall, it forms a natural counterpart to the aspects of cultural richness comprised in the living room and the patio (Figure 14.14). Herbs, vegetables, roses, blackberries are brought together in a cultivated wilderness. The courtyard appears not to be the center of the house, but is merely a hinge in an almost perfect reverse of nature and culture in the inner city’s tight fabric. In this sense, the patio house of Van Hee is at the same time a terraced house with an urban front and a rural rear.

It is tempting to resume the design in a structuralist scheme with counterparts and mediators. The courtyard combines elements of natural dwelling (trees, water, plants, weathering) with elements of architectural culture (passage, colonnade, cloister, veranda). This composition and the position in the middle of the plot make the courtyard a suitable spatial mediator between the exuberant natural garden and the living room as an exquisite carrier of cultural meanings. The design refines this powerful tripartite classification by adding secondary oppositions and mediations. One could see the
gallery-veranda as a mediating term between profane functions (kitchen, shower) and the living room’s sacral connotations. Does the demon of the structural discourse redeem at this point? The multiplication of terms, and the nuancing through thresholds and mediators make contradictions acceptable without neutralizing them.

Within the perspective of gender and domesticity, this kind of structuralist model should be regarded with suspicion. If it can be praised for its cognitive clarity and its semiotic refinement, it often contains implicit gender
connotations that can be patronizing or oppressive. This sheds light on another unavoidable issue to be considered in Van Hee’s house. How to value the strong presence of historical and archetypical basic forms, such as like the patio or the cloister? Of course, Van Hee is not the first to find inspiration in archetypal or almost primitive architecture. Van der Laan immediately comes to mind. In his architecture, however, the historical and typological inspiration result in a certain rigidity, in a purified and abstract aesthetics that is very photogenic. Van der Laan’s traditionalism fits essentialism and the quest for purification that was also present in modernism. It does not consider concrete dwelling, with its multiple needs and unspoken desires. It is no surprise, therefore, that Van der Laan’s abstract inhabitant is not quite feminine. To put purity forward as an ideal in dwelling architecture is liable to criticism that is analogous to the accusation that architectural modernism is anti-domesticity. Modernist rigidity conveys a denial by male designers of the value implicated in female knowledge of everyday domestic affairs. Imposing rigidity and purity, whether modernist or the result of archetypal inspirations, is thus not an attempt to make a house more livable or modern. Rather, it tries to purify, to unmask, to mute its possible evocative power, to uncover its essence, to make it more masculine.

In the work of Van Hee the reference to some kind of primitive integrity is situated on a completely different level. There is no purification, abstract aesthetics, representation of a lost essence, or imposition of masculine values. Typological and historical archetypes function as her point of departure, as counter forms preceding stylistic specification, social selection, normative determination, gender inscription, and mythical appropriation. Such counter forms are related to “dancing grounds” – they are receiving structures that provide the basic conditions for free living. The courtyard is such a counter form. It appeals rather to les jois essentielles than to purification, Latin warmth, pleasure without guilt, pure conviviality that requires no mirrors or marbles.

Yet the argument seems unconvincing. Is such a counter form that inviting? Can the patio release itself from its oppressive characteristics? Does not its centrality and panoptic position intrinsically implicate normative spatial effects and oppressive gender patterns? Another look is necessary.

The designer has taken precautions against the categorizing nature of structuralist schemes and against the doubtful characters of archetypes by relying on the designerly means of redoubling and the half-grid. Walls and stairs are doubled, producing parallel circuits that correct the centered sense of the patio. Three stairs connect the corridors and passages, located as far as possible from the patio. This structure allows the visitors to circulate through the house without being obliged to enter the courtyard. This pattern with its bypasses and closets cut out in the thickness of the wall is not only convenient but also fortifies the performing power of the house (Figures 14.15, 14.16).
The half-grid thus amends the centralizing position of the patio. A similar result is effectuated by the strategy of redoubling: two tables, two stairs, two walls, two gardens, two counter forms, two traditions prevent the bias towards dominance, exclusivity and oppression. The field of tension between both generates a hybrid space, which – literally and figuratively – leaves space for negotiation and domesticity.

Notes
3 Rem Koolhaas states “The city is no longer. We can leave the theatre now . . .” Rem Koolhaas, “The Generic City”, in OMA, Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, S M L XL, Rotterdam: 010, 1995, p. 1264.
8 Lacan defines the imaginary as an order of illusionary two-unity, based on the model of the mirror stage. See Jacques Lacan, “Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la function du Je” (The mirror stage as formative for the function of the I), Ecrits, pp. 93–100.
9 Gülşüm Baydar reads together different aspects of a feminine space in the work of Sue Best, Katja Silverman, and Hilde Heynen, with reference to Luce Irigaray. See her contribution to this volume.
10 The simultaneous focus on the spatial and social separation or gathering is a characteristic of dwelling demands. These demands direct dwelling needs but are like the latter, being translatable into concrete designs, though less literally.
12 Robert Venturi explores the figure of the poché in the architecture of the baroque period, referring to the architectural possibilities produced by the difference between interior space and outer volume. The difference between inner and outer wall, as well as the poché in-between, generate interesting possibilities for “complexity and contradiction.” See Robert Venturi,


14 Analogy, a relation of familiarity as well as difference between architectural types, is an important dimension in Aldo Rossi’s theory of the architecture of the city, as well in terms of urban analysis, as with respect to design. See Aldo Rossi, “The Analogous City: Panel,” in Lotus International, no. 13, December 1976, pp. 4–9; Aldo Rossi, “An Analogical Architecture,” in Architecture and Urbanism, no. 65, May 1976, pp. 74–76.

15 According to Bart Verschaffel, the gesture is situated in-between a purely instrumental activity and a ritual act. The power of the gesture resides in the way it is performed, in the interpretation of a regulated act. See Bart Verschaffel, “Architectuur is (als) een Gebaar” (Architecture is (as) a Gesture), in Hilde Heynen (ed.), Wonen Tussen Gemeenplaats en Poëzie. Opstellen over Stad en Architectuur (Dwelling between Commonplace and Poetry. Essays on the city and architecture), Rotterdam: 010, 1999, pp. 67–80.

16 The term “counter form” is taken over from the discussion by Francis Strauven of Aldo Van Eyck’s Otterlo Circles. In this scheme, the left half displays three architectural traditions exemplified by a Greek temple, a New Mexican pueblo and a “contraconstruction” by Theo Van Doesburg. The right half of the scheme represents a group of dancing Kayapo Indians. The left half acts as a “dancing ground” for the right half. According to Strauven, it is Van Eyck’s intention that the circles would convey the idea that architecture is not the expression, but the counter form of society. Initially, the term “counter form” would be coined by Van Doesburg who talked about “contravormen en contraconstructies” (counter forms and contracconstructions). See Francis Strauven, Aldo van Eyck. Relativiteit en Verbeelding (Aldo van Eyck. Relativity and Imagination), Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1994, pp. 352–356.
There is always a certain fascination involved in viewing photographs of domestic interiors. They appear to offer a window onto a spatial experience that is normally coded private. The desire to gain an insight into that experience, the desire to enter the space of another’s privacy, is at the heart of these images’ fascination. Yet the possibility for such an access to another’s domesticity is predicated upon – and normalized by – the idea that there is a core of domestic experience that is common and shared. It is this supposed commonality of experience that could be argued to define the domestic. From the nineteenth century, the domestic environment provides the context for the codification and normalization of familial roles. In this way, domesticity is both a unifying cultural and political project, as well as the context for the articulation of the autonomous individual subject.¹

Historical considerations of domestic design and lifestyle have largely been formulated within a frame of reference that renders essential this supposed commonality of domestic experience. The first comprehensive history of the interior and interior decoration, Mario Praz’s *A History of Interior Decoration from Pompeii to Art Nouveau*, collects together visual representations of domestic scenes throughout history as a way of understanding the essential values of domesticity.² Witold Rybczynski’s widely read *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, has popularized this account.³ A more recent text, Akiko Busch’s *Geography of Home: Writings About Where We Live*, crystallizes, with its titular “we,” the notion of domesticity as a collective
experience. And the current proliferation of popular media images of domestic life, from Martha Stewart to *Big Brother*, has entrenched the role of the domestic as itself the mediator of a contemporary culture formed from the collective consumption of images of itself.

Yet what do images of the domestic interior really tell “us” about the experience of domesticity that they picture? In order to propose a response to this very large but nonetheless important question, I shall work towards an analysis of two pairs of photographs of interiors by Adolf Loos. This analysis will treat them not as transparent windows onto the supposed reality of a spatial experience, but rather as kinds of masks to spatial experience. As masks, these photographs construct an interior on the image surface, and in so doing promote a kind of “seeing beyond” rather than into the image. This seeing beyond is an occasion for the retreat of the viewer down the path of their remembered associations with the domestic. In this retreat, a shared domesticity is construed, but precisely because of the opacity of the representational medium. This argument is contextualized by a series of important issues relating to the cultural status of the domestic interior in the early twentieth century, and it is with these issues that this chapter will be equally concerned. Gender identity, an issue which was particularly prominent in Loos’ architectural and cultural criticism, becomes the context, via the writing on feminine identity of Joan Riviere, through which to argue for the interior photographs as masks. Gender identity is also an issue which articulates something of the crisis of the domestic interior around the turn of the twentieth century, a crisis which is captured in Walter Benjamin’s well-known exposé of the bourgeois domestic interior, which will be discussed for the way in which it promotes a non-essentialist view of the domestic. This series of issues will be tackled in reverse order, beginning with Benjamin, then moving on to Loos’ own writings, and those who write about him, and ending with Riviere and the two pairs of photographs of Loos’ interiors.

The doubled interior and historical time

In order to investigate the issue of how representations, and in this case photographic images, construct a particular view of and relation to the domestic interior, we must escape the essentialism that has framed accounts of domestic design and lifestyle. One way to do this is to consider the domestic interior as a historically emergent concept and material manifestation, rather than an essential and timeless one. Having previously referred to the inner nature of the soul, and the interior sense of territory belonging to a state, from the beginning of the nineteenth century the interior comes to mean in English “The inside of a building or room, esp. in reference to the artistic effect; also, a picture or representation of the inside of a building or room. Also, in a theatre, a ‘set’ consisting of the inside of a building or room.” One of the first usages
of the word in this sense was in the title of Thomas Hope’s *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration* of 1807. This publication, together with Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine’s *Receuil de Décorations Intérieurs* of 1801, marked the newly emergent interior as a site of professional struggle between architects and upholsterers, and through the nineteenth century, interior decoration began to articulate itself separately from architecture.\(^7\) The interior emerges historically in this way in a doubled fashion. It gains both spatial and image-based senses in the context of a domesticity that begins to be marked out separately from architectural concerns.

One of the clearest accounts of the historical emergence of the domestic interior was written by Walter Benjamin in 1939. This account was given in the exposé which accompanied his voluminous and unfinished history of the nineteenth century, the *Arcades Project*.\(^8\) From the perspective of the interwar years, the *Arcades Project* attempted to provide a “prehistory” of the nineteenth century, a history of that epoch as the immediate but already archaic past. The bourgeois interior constitutes a fragment of this historical project made up entirely of fragments, while also being historically the environment where the fragmentary traces of a bourgeois’ individual existence would be collected. As such, the interior provided the bourgeoisie with a space of refuge from the city and its annihilation of experience, and in doing so, supported them in their illusions about how a connection to tradition, and personal and familial identity, might be maintained. The form of the *Arcades Project* reproduced the effects of this space of refuge by immersing the reader into the “dreamworld” of the nineteenth century. It was a device for “the projection of the historical into the intimate.”\(^9\) In the same way, the bourgeois inhabitant “delights in evoking . . . a world in which, to be sure, human beings are no better provided with what they need than in the real world, but in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful.”\(^10\) But for Benjamin, this immersion into a dreamworld was for the purpose of reawakening from it, and thus from the illusory dreams of his present time. At the same moment Benjamin seizes this image of the interior as a place of refuge, he presents an argument for the necessity to “trade in” this desire to leave traces of one’s existence in order to embrace a new poverty of experience in the modernity of the twentieth century. For Benjamin, the reworking of interior/exterior relations in the architectural modernism of the 1920s and 1930s provided a material provocation for a change in the understanding of, and the cultural and psychological possibilities for, inhabitation. The literally transparent glass spaces of modernism, and their possibilities for spatial flow and connection, mitigate the bourgeois idea of the interior as a space of encasing for the inhabitant. Within Benjamin’s frame of thinking, architectural modernism must win the battle over the bourgeois interior by removing its possibility from the inhabitational game.\(^11\)
Benjamin’s account of the interior exists within a complex temporality. On one level, it provides an account of the particular bourgeois formation of the interior which represents the apogee of developments from the beginning of the nineteenth century. On another level, this account is driven by the need to recognize this interior as irrecoverable from the perspective of the interwar years. Benjamin grasps the interior in its clearest image at the precise moment that he, or rather culture more generally, cannot return to the mode of inhabitation it nurtured. This image flashes only for a moment, being revealed as a dream image upon awakening to present cultural realities which are grasped precisely in their discontinuity from the past.

This crucial point of awakening has its historical corollary in the so-called “liquidation of the interior,” at the turn of the twentieth century. Approximately one hundred years after the professional split between architecture and interior decoration, Benjamin details a renewed struggle for the possession of the interior, one playing out through Art Nouveau and Jugendstil’s newly expanded conception of the interior as part of a total work of art, and the way in which the interior might spatialize and project its inhabitant’s identity. It is at this crucial moment of liquidation that gender becomes an issue of how the bourgeoisie might accept Benjamin’s program – that is, how the modernity of the twentieth century might be negotiated in terms of the familial and social roles organized around the domestic. We shall see that an argument about gender and identity is located in the doubling that marks the interior’s historical emergence.

The poor little rich man
Adolf Loos was the architect and cultural critic most closely involved in the complexities of Benjamin’s problematic of the interior. In Loos’ writings on male and female social roles, we encounter not a stark choice between the bourgeois or the modern – though Loos’ own rhetoric is inclined to present it that way – but precisely the difficulties in negotiating the cultural fallout of what Benjamin casts in terms of the liquidation of the interior. With Loos, these difficulties lead to a series of argued positions that map out a new territory of the interior in relation to the metropolis and modern social relations. And with Loos’ own domestic interiors, we see an attempt to negotiate the complexity of this new territory through an active engagement with the masking and dissimulating effects of interior photography.

In a parody Loos wrote of the Jugendstil artist/architect, a rich man decides to let art into his home as a response to his bourgeois ennui. The man goes to “a famous architect and says: ‘Bring Art to me, bring Art into my home. Cost is no object’.” The architect, “who did not wait for him to say it twice,” directs all of the interior decoration trades to create an entirely new interior for the man. The rich man is overjoyed, but soon discovers that he has
to learn how to live in this new interior, that it is so tightly controlled by the architect’s vision of art and an “artistic life” that there is literally no room for him to accumulate his own belongings and have them placed within the interior. The man comes to realize the effect of this constriction by art at first in an unconscious fashion: “he preferred to be home as little as possible.” The full impact of what the artist/architect had done to the man is communicated through the presence of his family, who, on the occasion of the man’s birthday, for the first time come into the frame as inhabitants of the interior. They present the man with gifts and he then summons the architect to help him place the gifts in an appropriate manner. Yet the architect becomes irate, claiming that the man should not accept such “traces,” that through his design of the interior, he has given the man everything and has “completed” him. This situation makes the man deeply unhappy, as he comes to the realization that his identity is fixed in place and that he is unable to develop further through an ongoing relation to the world of objects. The interior spatializes a frozen image of the man and the actions of his family show at once their exclusion from this image. In Benjamin’s terms, at the moment of its total capture by architecture as art, the interior as a space of inhabitation is liquidated.

Loos’ writing and architectural practice make a response to this liquidation. Rather than attempt to abandon the interior – as if such a move would really be possible, since part of the historical concept of the interior is that it is additional to architecture and made as much by inhabitation as by a designer’s intent – Loos negotiates a divorce between the interior and the architecture that encloses and makes space for it. It is in the conceptualization of this position that gender enters Loos’ frame of argument explicitly. The idea of the inhabitant as naturally and exclusively male is overtaken by an argument about the interior that articulates perspectives on the social mediation of male and female identity.

**Interior, exterior, and identity**

The bourgeois interior is conceptualized by Benjamin around the figure of the male inhabitant. It is a space of refuge for him from the public world of the city and its commerce. Yet to avoid the constrictions of his interior, the poor little rich man ends up spending more time at work, attending to his business affairs. This interior has left the man displaced. Massimo Cacciari has cast this displacement, and Loos’ designed response to it, in philosophical terms:

Like his exteriors, Loos confronts the absence of place head-on: to attempt to reverse its destiny would be to attempt to turn the idea of place into a utopia, and, paradoxically, to reconfirm the very principle of Entortung [displacement] he is attempting to investigate and put into question. In the Entortung every “pure” language of place
is a utopia and hence part of the same destiny of uprootedness or displacement that accompanies the *ars aedificandi* of the West. For this reason, Loos’ architecture does not seek the rationalization of “pure” places, but is aimed at showing the endless contradiction between the thought-out space of calculation, the equivalence of the exteriors, and the possibility of place, the hope of a place.\(^{15}\)

For Cacciari, the possibility of place is the possibility of the unproductive, the possibility of those things found in the collection, things “freed from the drudgery of being useful,” finding an interior. An interior of unproductivity is needed to counter the rationalization of the metropolis, a rationalization ruled by the exchange value of money. Such a place can only be created within the metropolis, otherwise it will fall into the paradoxical position of simply re-enacting the displacement from which it springs. The situation of the unproductive is characterized by Cacciari with Lou Andreas-Salomé’s remembrance of collecting buttons, tokens, unlike money, which have no exchange value and are collected precisely for their unproductive value. Cacciari argues that this unproductivity both necessitates and instantiates the interior, and in respect of Loos’ interiors, he suggests that this sort of thinking is a facet of “Loos’ profoundly ‘feminine’ side.”\(^{16}\) It is not that a Loos interior looks feminine in relation to the masculine exterior. Rather, the exterior is differentiated from – though enclosed by – the exterior to the extent that the interior is inhabited and not simply seen.

But we strike a problem with the way in which gender is figured in Cacciari’s account when we ask what a feminine aspect in the interior might mean for male and female identities as they are contextualized in the relationship between interior and metropolis. The key is found in Loos’ writings on male and female clothing. These writings argue positions on the social construction of gender identity, and were part of Loos’ larger critique of the artistic culture which spawned the poor little rich man and his architect. Loos begins his 1898 article “Ladies’ Fashion” thus: “Ladies’ fashion! You disgraceful chapter in the history of civilization! You tell of mankind’s secret desires.”\(^{17}\) In this characteristically hyperbolic statement, Loos shows his dismay at the way in which women’s clothes are linked to what he terms sensuality. He blames a fashion-conscious culture for forcing women to appeal to men’s sensuality through outward display. As masculine tastes towards female sensuality change, so do women’s fashions. Ornament and color as key modes of registering change in fashion link women’s clothing to cultural regressiveness. For Loos, modern culture is achieved in the extent to which the desire for ornament is overcome. For those who are modern, clothing is chosen in its appropriateness to particular situations, especially where productive labor is concerned. In writing on “Men’s Fashion” around the same time,
Loos argues that unornamented clothing allows a man to negotiate different public and social situations according to the appropriateness of his attire.\textsuperscript{18} A gentleman’s suit masks his individuality which is too strong to be represented directly through clothing: “In order to be dressed correctly, one must not stand out at the centre of culture.”\textsuperscript{19} The idea of being inconspicuous means that a man has a certain mobility. Unlike a woman who is a slave to fashion, a man can go about his business unnoticed. If women were modern, they would stand alongside men, dressed in tailored clothes, and appeal to them “by economic independence earned through work.”\textsuperscript{20}

Loos’ position on fashion has a spatial consequence. The anonymity allowed by the mask of the gentleman’s suit relates to the equivalence of the exteriors of Loos’ domestic buildings and the way they participate in the “thought-out space of calculation.” As such, they exist in tension with “the possibility of place,” a possibility to be secured in an interior held within, but not revealed through the exterior mask. For Loos and Cacciari, the mask is a masculine accoutrement that hides a feminine side, philosophically that part of a masculine identity that seeks an interior place and manages that place by not revealing its nature to the exterior. Yet at the level of social relations, Janet Stewart has argued: “The emancipatory promise of modernity which would allow the endless play of difference beneath a veneer of homogeneity fails at the level of sexual equality, and the possibility of social interaction in the bourgeois public sphere is denied to women. . . . Loos maintains that while men occupy the public sphere, a woman’s place is in the home.”\textsuperscript{21} The possibility that women should be modernized and join men in the public sphere is predicated on the masculinization of women’s clothing, the attainment of a mask. As Stewart has commented, there is undoubtedly an “essentialist distinction between male and female”\textsuperscript{22} at play in Loos’ thinking and argument. Yet, through the way in which this spatial consequence plays out, this cannot be taken as a final argument on the matter.

\textbf{The feminine masquerade and photography’s veil}

The mask as a masculine accoutrement, or, more generally, an accoutrement that marks one as modern, has not been its dominant designation within modern concepts of identity. Indeed, within psychoanalysis, femininity has been considered a masquerade. In 1929, the time when Loos was completing his most celebrated houses, Joan Riviere published her seminal study “Womanliness as a Masquerade.” She argues that womanliness, what we might understand as the recognizability of female identity, is “put on,” is the result of a masquerade.\textsuperscript{23} Riviere argues that in the male-dominated world of professions and public social interaction, the woman’s participation is predicated on both a masculine identification such that participation is desired, and a resultant masquerade as a woman as a defense against the implications for
social interaction of such a masculine identification. This masquerade is not a simple case, as it might have been for Loos, of women joining men in tailored clothes. As Stephen Heath has argued in respect of Riviere’s argument: “In the masquerade the woman mimics an authentic – genuine – womanliness but then authentic womanliness is such a mimicry, is the masquerade ([Riviere:] ‘they are the same thing’); to be a woman is to dissimulate a fundamental masculinity, femininity is that dissimulation.”24 The Lacanian iteration of this position is summarized by Heath thus: “Adornment is the woman, she exists veiled; only thus can she represent lack, be what is wanted: lack ‘is never presented other than as a reflection on a veil’.”25

There is thus an argument for a feminine mask, or rather for the mask, and its veiling, as feminine. One could work through this position with respect to Loos’ arguments about fashion – that is, in the realm of male and female social relations,26 but this position presents a way of engaging further with Cacciari’s designation of Loos’ interior as itself feminine. For Cacciari, the interior is precisely the veiled, the unseen: “The Loosian difference between seeing and inhabiting, interior and exterior, seeks to preserve yet another place where this [forgotten] dimension [of dwelling] might be collected. This difference is the utmost interior.”27 Loos might well agree:

It is my greatest pride that the interiors which I have created are totally ineffective in photographs. I am proud of the fact that the inhabitants of my spaces do not recognize their own apartment in the photographs, just as the owner of a Monet painting would not recognize it at Kastan’s. I have to forego the honour of being published in the various architectural magazines. I have been denied the satisfaction of my vanity.

And thus my efforts may be ineffective. Nothing is known of my work. But it is a sign of the strength of my ideas and the correctness of my teachings. I, the unpublished, I whose efforts are unknown, I the only one of thousands who has real influence.28

Loos made these comments in his 1910 article entitled “Architecture,” where he blames representation, drawing in the design phase and photography in the publication phase, for the separation between architect and craftsman that led to the culturally backward unity of the arts that is manifest in the poor little rich man’s interior. In this particular take on the problem, Loos argues that the rendered drawings of design which are handed to the craftsman/builder for execution force the craftsman to reproduce designed, primarily ornamental, schemes, rather than allowing the craftsman to continue with the traditions of building and manufacture that have given rise to functionally appropriate objects and domestic spaces.
But we might recall here the historically emergent concept of the bourgeois domestic interior as doubled, as marked both by a spatial and by a representational or image-based designation. In taking up this problematic, Beatriz Colomina links Loos’ rejection of representation to his conceptualization of the Raumplan, which comes together through an experience and an adjustment to domestic space as it is perceived and felt three-dimensionally in construction. It was not that photography somehow failed Loos. Rather, he was antagonistic towards received notions about the transparency of representation. Colomina argues that Loos’ interiors involve a complex interaction between representation and spatial condition: “Looking at the photographs, it is easy to imagine oneself in these precise, static positions, usually indicated by the unoccupied furniture. The photographs suggest that it is intended that these spaces be comprehended by occupation, by using this furniture, by ‘entering’ the photograph, by inhabiting it.” She adds a footnote to this comment, saying that “the perception of space is produced by its representations; in this sense, built space has no more authority than do drawings, photographs or descriptions.” Colomina comments on Loos’ involvement in the manipulations of many photographs of his interiors. As such, she argues that photography masks interior spatial experience, ensuring a kind of privacy for the inhabiting subject, but a privacy that is implicated problematically with publicity and publication as visual questions.

Let us consider the manipulations in two sets of photographs in order to understand how the photograph might mask and also double interior spatial experience. One set shows Loos’ Khuner House in Payerbach, Austria, where the view through a picture window has been shown as alternative photomontages (Figures 15.1 and 15.2). The other set shows the music room in Loos’ Moller House in Vienna, where a photomontaged cello appears to sit in a glass cabinet (Figure 15.3), which is otherwise shown with an opaque surface (Figure 15.4). For the Khuner House, the photomontage was a technical necessity. In the practice of interior photography, windows often provided a direct light source and were not often positioned in shot. If they were, they often appeared “blown out,” as luminous light sources rather than as transparent membranes framing a view. Loos and his photographer exploited this necessity, choosing at least two different views for the picture window. For the Moller House, the exploitation of technical possibilities within the medium of photography is taken further with the introduction of the cello into the image. Referring to the photography of Loos’ interiors more broadly, Colomina emphasizes the ways in which, through the spaces’ interaction with photography, devices such as framing and reflection are played up as part of a pictorial-spatial composition.
15.1
Khuner House, Payerbach, Austria, 1930:
master’s room

15.2
Khuner House, Payerbach, Austria, 1930:
alternative view of master’s room
Moller House, Vienna, Austria, 1928: music room, showing cello in glass cabinet

Moller House, Vienna, Austria, 1928: music room, showing empty glass cabinet
more "natural" scene in the interior. Colomina, on the other hand, argues that Loos' photographs "draw the viewer's attention to the artifice involved in the photographic process." These two positions appear to be mutually exclusive, but both might, in fact, have a mutual validity if we think back to the idea of the feminine as masquerade. As a compensation for masculine identification, the masquerade attempts to produce the "naturally" feminine, but it can only produce this to the extent to which the masquerade is the manipulation of artifice. The photographed interior is the feminine masquerade, doubled between the appearance of "natural" spatial depth and the play of the representational surface. As much as we might imagine the interior as the Benjaminian refuge of the collector to be its purely spatial sense, we also can see that the image surface obeys this same logic. The technique of photomontage allows the image surface to "collect" objects and fragments that are external to it, and through this collection, to interiorize them. The cello in the Moller House is "freed from the drudgery of being useful" in order to be positioned as a kind of token in the music room. The views through the picture window of the Khuner House, in their very interchangeability, operate as the colportage pictures Benjamin highlighted as belonging to the bourgeois interior, whereby "The same picture can be copied twenty times without exhausting demand and, as the vogue prescribes, each well-kept drawing room wants to have one of these fashionable furnishings." Loos is not simply fulfilling bourgeois fancies, however. Through photographic manipulation, he recognizes the doubleness of the interior, that it is at once an image and a spatial situation to be experienced by inhabitation. By not recognizing his interior in a photograph, Loos' inhabitant experiences precisely the uncanny effect of the interior's doubleness. While Colomina argues that the perception of space is produced by its representation, I would argue slightly differently that the perception of the interior is produced in the slippage between image and space. The entry into the photograph that Colomina sees it demand is, I would argue, a kind of "seeing beyond" the photograph, an association of the interior with one’s memories of spatial situations. Even Loos' inhabitant, who does not recognize his interior, would only come to do so through associating what he sees in a photograph with a memory of spatial inhabitation. Here Loos is describing his own childhood interior, describing precisely what cannot be pictured as the interior. It is a memory that a photograph of an interior, in its unrecognizability, in its inadequacy, might prompt:

Take the table: a crazy jumble of a table with some dreadful metalwork. But our table, our table! Can you imagine what that meant? Can you imagine what wonderful hours we spent at it? By lamp-light! In the evening when I was a little boy I just could not tear
myself away from it, and father kept having to imitate the night-watchman’s horn to make me scuttle off in fright into the nursery. My sister Hermine spilled ink on it when she was a little tiny baby. And the pictures of my parents! What dreadful frames! But they were a wedding present from father’s workmen. And this old-fashioned chair here! A leftover from grandmother’s home. And here an embroidered slipper in which you can hang the clock. Made in kindergarten by my sister Irma. Every piece of furniture, every object, every thing had a story to tell, the story of our family. Our home was never finished, it developed with us, and we with it.39

As a refutation of the Jugendstil interior, this memory is centered on childhood and familial experience. For Loos himself, this is a regressive memory, a symptom of his displacement in a modern culture of upheaval. The photographed interior as a feminine dissimulation instantiates a lack which produces this symptom. In her work on the feminine masquerade and cinematic representation, Mary Ann Doane comments that this positioning of the feminine as lack produces a “mirror-effect by means of which the question of the woman reflects only the man’s own ontological doubts.”40 If the domestic interior is a refuge, it is chimerical, experienced uncannily through its doubled condition.

Coda

Even as it is chimerical, the domestic interior is affecting. Beginning with a simple comment about the fascination that photographs of interiors hold has led to an argument about how this effect is at the heart of the historically emergent concept of the interior when its doubleness is played across indexical images. This affectivity is not natural or timeless, but is precisely constructed. As we learn from Benjamin, a history of the interior cannot simply be an account of its linear development across time, as if the concept of the interior remained above the vagaries of history. If the interior has a history, it must be one of emergence and discontinuity. Such a history of the effects and affectivity of the interior might best be conducted through the investigation of particular examples in all of their contextual specificity. This chapter has attempted one such investigation. In this particular case, the issue of gender identity has provided an occasion whereby the lines of this larger argument about how the interior is treated historically can be drawn; however, the interior is not essentially a gendered material and conceptual phenomenon. Rather, a certain coalescence of factors took place in the early twentieth century whereby gender identity figures as a crucial way of understanding certain conditions of the interior at that time. We may still be living with the legacy of such a circumstance, but we should not make the mistake of
assuming that this is what is given in the material and the conceptual phenomena we investigate.

And finally, what does the idea of the “history of emergence and discontinuity” mean for writing accounts of domestic design and lifestyle that inevitably rely on the evidence of visual images? My argument suggests that one can only have access to what these accounts construe as the experience of domesticity by a kind of imagined association, rather than by the transparency and objectivity of visual evidence. Our understanding of domestic experience as shared is formed from the sorts of associations that indexical images produce in their denial of direct access to the space of domesticity. Understanding this as the major effect of such accounts means realizing that objectivity only exists through a kind of consensus of subjective association. Detailing the historical formation and contemporary conditions of that consensus should be the major task of accounts of domesticity.

Notes
14 Ibid., p. 126.
16 Ibid., p. 182.
18 A. Loos, “Men’s Fashion,” in Spoken Into the Void, p. 11.
19 Ibid., p. 12 (emphasis in original). For Loos, writing in 1898, the center of culture was London.


Ibid., p. 52.

In thinking about the social construction of identity, Heath compares the feminine masquerade to masculine identity built on presentation: “To the woman’s masquerade there thus corresponds male display (parade is Lacan’s term)[.] . . . All the trappings of authority, hierarchy, order, position make the man, his phallic identity: ‘if the penis was the phallus, men would have no need of feathers or ties or medals. . . . Display [parade], just like the masquerade, thus betrays a flaw: no one has the phallus’” (ibid., pp. 55–56).


Ibid., p. 234.

Ibid., p. 369, n. 3.

Ibid., pp. 270–271.

Ibid., p. 31.


Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 218, quoting a French literary account of the 1870s (emphasis in original).


The role of intimacy and eroticism remains a largely unwritten dimension of modern Western architectural culture. Eroticism in particular and the focus of this essay is an elusive subject, not easily given to academic or scientific methods of analysis or categorization. Fleeting by nature – an evocation of the invisible, dynamic, and perpetual state of desire, eroticism eludes fixed definition. It could be said that the erotic dimension of architecture is the unconscious, instinctual side of our experience of form and space, implicit, and virtual. And like the unconscious, it is masked and encoded, characterized by excess, elaboration, irony, and humor. Eschewing the overtly sexual, the erotic is a state of phenomenal ambiguity, indirection, tension, and suspension, a virtual condition engendering feeling through tricks of perception.

In the history of eroticism and modern architecture, the boudoir is a significant figure. An overtly sexualized “female” space born at the threshold of modernity, the boudoir was a specifically female-inhabited and female-directed domestic space. By the early twentieth century, as the boudoir begins to disappear, it re-emerges as an aesthetic sensibility infusing the modernist house. Its subsequent repression, displacement, re-emergence, and transformation offer a unique point of departure for the study of the relationship between eroticism, modernism, and the feminine. The gradual absorption of the haptic boudoir and its sexual identity and purpose into the virtual world of spatial and visual relations of the twentieth-century modernist house, raises many questions about the interaction of masculine and feminine psyche,
masculine logos and feminine eros, and desire in the formation of modernist spatiality, suggesting an implicit eroticism, the modernist interplay of structure and space.

The inherent ambiguities and dynamics of architecture’s double nature as both physical object and spatial condition, discursive discipline and immersive experience could be read as an evocation of the dynamics of erotic desire. As erotic spaces, the boudoir and the petite maison in this context illustrate the encoded interplay of masculine and feminine desire. What might these spaces reveal about the difference between masculine and feminine desire, and how it is negotiated, spatially and architecturally? How was erotic space transformed from the early modern era to early modernism, and what does this tell us about shifting social, sexual, and political values and identities? Could the modernist embrace of space be seen as an architectural recuperation of the principle of eros, expressed through the indirect play of virtual–visual and spatial–relations?

Space, as a virtual condition and the matrix of architecture, surprisingly, lends itself easily to theories of desire and potentiality. Oceanic, boundless, infinite, immersive, sublime, and terrifying, space is primal, matrix, substrate of everything, identified with freedom, the feminine, and the maternal. As a virtual condition, it is the “other” of everything definite, physical or material. In the early twentieth century, space and light were embraced by modern architects as their paean and panacea, and harnessed as instruments of the healthful body, mind, and spirit, necessary to good living and revolutionary architecture. Technology allowed light, air, and openness to be brought inside the house through transparency of form and continuity of surface, the interpenetration of inside and out, so that unity reigned in a new world of space.

A study of the history and aesthetics of the boudoir and its transformation shows how the feminine principles of instinct and feeling, attributes that shaped its sensual decoration, intimate use, atmospheric and internalized character, were encoded spatially and architecturally. Its evolution highlights the shifting roles of women and suggests the influence of feminine values on the spatially integrated, visually dynamic, and programmatically flexible modernist house.

Architecture has long been used as a narrative structure for dreams and stories of longing, love, and seduction from the Renaissance forward, including the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* of 1499 and the erotic novellas, such as *La Petite Maison* of 1759, which were so popular in eighteenth-century France. The boudoir figures prominently in these tales. From its early history to the twentieth century, the design and decoration of the boudoir portrays the flowering, diminishment, and negotiation of female power, and offers clues to the lives and influence of its female inhabitants. During its evolution, the
boudoir oscillated from a sensuous space for intimate conversation and female retreat to a clandestine and sexually explicit meeting place, from an isolated, exotic fantasy space to the virtual world of spatial and visual relations of high modernism of the 1920s and 1930s.

In this brief essay, I outline the history and aesthetics of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French, English, and German boudoir, and then touch on its transformation in three buildings by seminal modernist architects completed during the watershed years of 1928–1932. Although I focus on the boudoirs in these buildings, it is my hope that this history will lend some insight into their role and influence in the shaping of the sensual abstraction, spatial, and visual strategies, and the social, sexual, and political meanings of modern architecture.

The historical boudoir

Voluptuous space
The earliest boudoir was not a room, but a transitional space. Sometimes it occupied a corner or a nook, more often it was a connective in-between space. Cousin to the escritoire, or writing desk, with its locked drawers and secret compartments, and the seventeenth-century ruelle, that dark and hidden space between the bed and the wall where valuables were kept, the boudoir was an inner world, private space, close-up, intimate. The eroticism of the early boudoir is conveyed in a little watercolor of a bed painted by Fragonard and featured in the Goncourt brothers’ book on eighteenth-century French feminine culture. The bed and its canopy are rendered as soft and watery as clouds, the coverlets suggesting a woman’s body at rest. The whole effect is of indeterminacy and light, a suspended world. As the eye wanders along the surfaces and depths of watercolor, one enters a world suspended between two and three dimensions, an ambiguous space in which everything is suggested and nothing is fully revealed or complete.

The boudoir first appeared in the early 1700s as a term that referred to a distinctly female space. It had no specific program, but accommodated a variety of activities – reading, resting, bathing, dressing, intimate conversation, and, later during the libertine era, a place for clandestine meeting and sexual seduction. Originally a place of feminine retreat in the aristocratic house, its roots in the French verb bouder – meaning to sulk or pout – indicate that it was intended as a place in which to feel. It is unknown how the space originated – by male or female request – but it is easy to imagine the need for escape, given the very public nature and formal duties of the aristocratic house. As the exclusively male study already existed, it could be surmised that it was the lady of the house who created this little space of her own for retreat. However,
its name, which seems slightly pejorative, may have been donned by her male counterpart.

Located deep within the neoclassical French hôtel, one of a chain of secondary rooms that ran enfilade alongside the larger public spaces, the boudoir could be thought of as part of a parallel world of private spaces that comprised the double life of the aristocratic house. Usually reached by a labyrinthine or circuitous route, it was located between the sleeping chamber or small salon, and the wardrobe or cabinet. Its only furnishings were a chaise longue or daybed, and perhaps a small table or stool. It had a fireplace and sometimes opened onto a garden. The walls were often decorated with mirrors and paintings of mythological and natural scenes set into panels embellished with carved or plaster decoration, reinforcing a literal and aesthetic ambiguity that dematerialized the finite and rational language of its neoclassical architectural container (Figure 16.1).

Like Fragonard’s little bed, the eighteenth-century boudoir was a sensual haptic space. Draped, mirrored, low-lit, synaesthetic and atmospheric, and designed to excite the senses and erase any sense of boundary and place, its tactile decoration and elaborate character became identified with the quintessentially feminine and with aristocratic taste, an identification that served to strengthen its subversive and illicit character during the French Revolution.

In 1780, Le Camus de Mézières, in his classic treatise on architecture, The Genius of Architecture; or, the Analogy of that Art with our Sensations, describes the specifically emotional and psychological effect intended in the planning and character of rooms in the aristocratic house, and personifies the pleasure-seeking boudoir as a fashionable lady designed to titillate:

[The boudoir is] the abode of delight, here she seems to reflect on her designs and to yield to her inclinations . . . this room is a lady of fashion to be adorned . . . light and rhythmical, the forms not pronounced . . . all must be convenient and all must please . . . details made to be seen close must satisfy by their harmony. The burden of the whole is this: that enjoyment is close at hand.7

The elaborate world of the boudoir, glimpsed in the dance and flicker of candlelight, must have created the illusion of a magical dream-like space outside of time and place. In a scene halfway through the film Valmont,8 a drama of sexual intrigue set in eighteenth-century France, we get a taste of how the oneiric and erotic boudoir might have felt. A virgin is spirited away in the middle of the night to rendezvous with her young lover. She is ushered into a candlelit room and, as the servant undresses her, she glimpses surrounding her in the flickering light details of erotic scenes. Voluptuous
bodies intertwined, gently veiled in diaphanous cloth, a man’s desirous look, an arm grasping a leg. “Who lives here?” she inquires of the servant. “No one,” the woman replies with an enigmatic look.

Indeed, the boudoir operated by many of the same strategies as do dreams. Through doubling, displacement, substitution, and symbolization, it eluded censorship and created a literal and psychological space for fantasy and play. Its intimacy was heightened by its atmospheric indeterminacy, even while its detailing was often explicitly sexual, as in Emile Zola’s description of a boudoir from his nineteenth-century novel *La Curée*, about the downfall of an eighteenth-century lady:

> Renée’s private apartment was a nest of silk and lace, a marvel of luxurious coquetry. A tiny boudoir led into the bedroom. The two rooms formed but one, or at least the boudoir was nothing more than the threshold of the bedroom, a large recess, furnished with chaises longues, and with a pair of hangings instead of a door . . .⁹

As intimated in the above passage, the “feminine” boudoir, a whisper of a space in an increasingly intimate conversation of rooms, was sexualized space – the space of projected desire. In Zola’s novel, the boudoir is a spatial analog of “flesh-and-blood” femininity, a barely disguised description of the female genitalia, in keeping with the tradition of the erotic architectural novellas produced during the eighteenth century.
As in Jean-François de Bastide’s erotic novel of 1758, *La Petite Maison*, sexual seduction is lightly disguised as architectural discourse, using the setting of the house to contain and amplify the tension of the erotic encounter. The artifice of the mirrored boudoir in *La Petite Maison* and its intricate play of reflections becomes a voyeuristic game enabling the negotiation of male and female desire:

. . . she was now able to see how well he could feign, and felt that such dangerous art in such a charming place exposed one to no end of treacherous temptations. To dispel this fearful thought, Melite moved away from the Marquis toward one of the mirrors, pretending to readjust a pin in her coiffure. Tremicour stood in front of the opposite mirror, and with the help of this trick was able to watch her . . .

During the latter half of the eighteenth century, the boudoir had become so identified with its female inhabitant that it came to stand in for male desire and female desirability. One popular erotic novella of the time authored by a woman, *Point de Lendemain* (No Tomorrow) of 1777, tells the tale of male seduction by a female protagonist. So intense is the young man’s erotic desire that he displaces his yearning for his seducer onto her seduction chamber. Imagining her awaiting him in her pleasure villa, he suddenly exclaims, “it was no longer Mme de T– that I desired, but her cabinet . . .”

A rendezvous of mind and body
What began as the female counterpart to the male study in the early eighteenth century, by mid-century had become not only a symbol of feminine sexuality, but a locus of female political influence and intellectual power in French aristocratic society. Its design and decoration, while often produced by male “upholsterers,” was directed by the lady of the house. It was she who awarded the commissions to artists whose paintings and sculptures ornamented its walls, and her choices influenced the direction of official “taste,” carrying all the political, social, and philosophical meanings associated with it. On the domestic stage of the sexualized boudoir, the libertine philosophe and saloniste engaged politics and morality, obtaining some measure of freedom from the social and sexual conventions of the time. As “the center of discussions about morality . . . and discourse about sexual power relationships,” the boudoir provided the physical and psychological space for subversion of a fixed and rigid social system from within.

As an erotically charged discursive space – both intellectual meeting place and explicitly sexual feeling space – a rendezvous of mind and body – the transgressive nature of the boudoir had certain benefits.
Associated with both the carnal and the cerebral, and radically indeterminate both aesthetically and functionally, the boudoir for a time symbolized freedom. It created space for a female “other” – in this case, the aristocratic lady – not just to seduce but to think and discuss, to wield her power within the dominant social structure of the state. The well-known portraits of Mme de Pompadour and other royal mistresses and salonistes in their boudoirs are portraits of female power (Figure 16.2). Pictured half-reclining in her boudoir, luxuriously dressed, with book in hand and a thoughtful expression on her face, Boucher’s rendering of Mme de Pompadour portrays the influence and patronage enjoyed by the *femme savante*.
Substitution and symbolization

With the ascendancy of rationalism and the rise of the middle classes following the French Revolution, the overt sexuality, aestheticism, and subjectivity of this female realm became widely associated with libertine hedonism, and its more explicit sexual and political purpose was gradually displaced onto less immediate and more remote objects. An obsession with all things “oriental” – primarily Ottoman – can be found in the elaborate tenting of many boudoirs in the early nineteenth century and the adoption of Turko-Arabic names for its furnishings. Pictures made of boudoirs of this time are often depicted empty of inhabitants or with a solitary female figure reading, embroidering, or forlornly gazing out of a window (Figure 16.3).
By the mid-nineteenth century, as the gap between public and private life widened, the interconnected matrix plan gave way to the discrete spaces of corridor planning. And the boudoir, where it survived in the bourgeois house, became isolated and disconnected from the body of the house. It returned to its earlier use as a private retreat in which, amid the embroidered textures of ephemera from exotic countries, the bourgeois housewife might escape to read novels such as Zola’s *La Curée* about the downfall of the aristocracy.

As the carnality of the eighteenth century was reviled by the increasingly puritanical and sexually repressive Victorian era, the overtly sexual purpose of the earlier boudoir was displaced by and encoded in exotic narratives. Objects, furnishings, and decorations borrowed from Middle Eastern cultures eroticized female sexuality, linking the exotic and the erotic. The boudoir became a fantasy space in which the erotic “other” was allowed, not in the form of flesh and blood, but in the realm of the imagination.

In the early twentieth century, the aristocratic boudoir re-emerges in the work of seminal modernist architects for their *haute bourgeois* clientele, sometimes as a boudoir for the woman of the house (who was now often its principal, if behind-the-scenes, patron), but more often as an aesthetic sensibility. In the case of Adolf Loos’ work, as will be shown, the boudoir was both the literal center and symbolic heart of the house, a female space and a way of making space.15

**The modernist boudoir**

*The erotics of sensed space*

Straddling nineteenth- and twentieth-century sensibilities, Adolf Loos was no stranger to the theatrical, immersive, draped spaces of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century boudoir. Although he would decry the use of ornamentation16 in architecture, the fur-lined, fabric-enveloped bedroom he designed for his wife Lina early in his career (1904) and his frequent inclusion of draped fabrics, elaborate visual texturing of surfaces, the interplay of mirrors and windows in his later work suggest an affinity with the earlier tented boudoir and its sensuous decoration.

At the heart of the Müller House (1929–1930) in Prague – considered the “most complete expression of Loos’ conception of architecture”17 – is nested a boudoir or *Damenzimmer* (Figure 16.4). The *Damenzimmer* epitomizes the “sensed space” of Loos’ *Raumplan* with the erotic strategies of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century boudoir. Although it occupies a middle-class house, the *Damenzimmer* is a modernist transformation of the aristocratic neoclassical boudoir. Its designation as a female space, its indeterminate program, its visually tactile surfaces, and its veiled but aggressive
presence, confirm its debt to its predecessor. It has no specified use, although the alcoves, bookshelves, and chaises suggest a place for reading, resting, and intimate conversation, and possibly a romantic encounter. Like the libertine boudoir, it has a nested but autonomous presence within the house. However, unlike the historical boudoir, the *Damenzimmer* is not a peripheral space, but a spatially dynamic volume that is integral to the house and central to both its plan and conception.

Suspended over the entry vestibule between the salon, the dining room and the study, and approached by a spiral path, the *Damenzimmer* is a veiled object from within which its inhabitant may overlook both the salon and the street without being seen. Although the salon is not directly visible from the boudoir, the window separating it from the salon below slides into the wall, making it possible to listen without being seen. With its outer walls facing the inside of the house, its wrapped staircases, its doorways cast in shadow, the *Damenzimmer* is simultaneously exposed and enclosed, public and private – hidden in plain sight. As Beatriz Colomina suggests, it may symbolize not only an “architectural construction of the female,” but the conceptual centrality of her erotic presence in the *Raumplan*.

Metaphorically speaking, its sectional flow and spatial ambiguity represent an undoing of bounded, separated, and defined social structures represented by nineteenth-century corridor planning, and an embrace of the flowing and more labyrinthine space of the older matrix plan. The Müller...
House boudoir is a visually and spatially fluid set of dimensionally interconnected spaces, fully expressing Loos’ development of the historical matrix plan into a three-dimensional matrix section. “In many ways a miniature of the villa,” the Müller Damenzimmer is the epitome of Loos’ spatially dynamic Raumplan, a complex combination of interconnected spaces and labyrinthine circulation, which he likened to “a chess game in space.”

Like the boudoir, the Raumplan resists categorization and exists, not unlike eroticism, in a state of tension. If eroticism “consists in keeping desire in a state of maximum tension in complicity with the forbidden,” then eroticism is an essential underlying theme in Loos’ thought and work. Two principle ideas – the Raumplan and the role of cladding – thrive on tension and prohibition, and their integrating function and ambiguous character betray their underlying eroticism.

Although not swathed in yards of drapery, mirrors, and paintings of mythical seductions, the walls and surfaces of the Loosian boudoir are patterned and decorative, substituting visual texture for the intense tactility of the draped space. Ascending into the Damenzimmer, one finds a multi-leveled space, a rendezvous of balcony, boudoir and stair, in which the softness and high relief of the eighteenth-century draped interior has been hardened and flattened into felt-covered floors, tightly upholstered built-in chaises and highly graphic wood furnishings. With its carefully book-ended lemonwood paneling and elaborate visual fluting of the striated marble, the boudoir conveys an atmosphere of warmth and intimacy which is in marked contrast to the formal, muted exterior of the villa, which itself creates an erotic tension.

Indeed, the eros/vitality of the Damenzimmer and the Raumplan lies in its tolerance – its embrace, even – of ambiguity, its utter resistance to singularity on the interior, the muted or veiled quality of its exterior, and the ensuing paradoxical relationship of both. Like eroticism, which escapes rigid categories and singular definition, the Raumplan is essentially anti-type. Safely tucked into the alcove, the eye is free to wander inside and out, as continuous surfaces blend into otherwise discrete rooms. In the process, the dweller slips along the wires of both sensual and spatial knowledge – the empathic and the cognitive – weaving the experience of dwelling and constructing spatial experience at the moment of its experiencing.

In the self-reflective internalized nature of his houses, Loos intended to provoke and question modern values regarding the power of the individual – and the place of the female in particular – in relation to the dominant social structures in the early twentieth century. Loos ascribed to the bourgeois view of women and the aristocratic view of art, “explicitly assign[ing] art to the feminine.” The conceptual significance of the Müller House Damenzimmer betrays Loos’ perhaps unconscious embrace of Georg Simmel’s idealization of the home as an “autonomous . . . inner sanctum . . . in
which women would be empowered to create significant cultural forms.”

The panoptical location of the half-hidden Müller House boudoir and its conceptual significance in relation to the Raumplan affirms the central presence of women in his architecture and suggests the powerful role of an eroticized “other” in the modernist formulation of space in early twentieth-century architectural thought.

The erotics of transitional space

In the Maison de Verre (1928–1932), Pierre Chareau transforms rigid, mass-produced industrial materials into singular objects, sensuous textures and a soft palette, and meticulously shifts between the transparent, the translucent, and the opaque as he calibrates the transitions between the domestic and the clinical. Although celebrated in its time as a functionalist work by avant-garde modernists, the Maison de Verre clearly exceeds its functionalism in its embrace of “excessiveness through a reciprocal exchange of masculine and feminine.”

There is a surreal repetitiveness and redundancy in the organization and hyperdetailing of the house which is erotic – insofar as the erotic always escapes classification and type – and which undermines its classification as strictly modernist.

Built on the site of an eighteenth-century hôtel particulier as both home and medical offices for Annie Dalsace and her husband Jean, a gynecologist, it is significant that the Maison de Verre grew out of a particularly close collaboration with both client and craftsman. Chareau and his engineer designed the structure of the house along rational lines, a steel frame surrounding an apartment that could not be removed. Its internal organization, however, is characterized by Chareau’s meticulous attention to degrees of distinction between public and private, transparent and translucent, inside and out, mobility and stasis. He reimagines industrial materials, scaling and detailing them in ways that soften and humanize the clinical environment, while enlivening and heightening the functionality of the home.

Throughout the interior, Chareau uses steel and glass to activate the transitional spaces in ways that seem to dissolve their natural rigidity and hardness. He flexes, curves, rolls, and perforates steel to make screens, staircases, bookshelves, and cabinets. He designs one-of-a-kind mechanisms for movement and multiple function and effect, like the swiveling, pivoting bathroom closet and its sliding drawers. Glass blocks are assembled to curve and shimmer, allowing a soft luminosity to infuse the interior by day or night (via external theatrical lighting) and the building to glow after dark. The glass curtain wall, a play of translucent and transparent blocks, organized on a grid, presents an ever-changing experience of light.

All the spaces in the house to one degree or another are engaged in the play of transformation, whether through changing light or mobile
furnishings, and seem to be even more intensely activated in the intimate or transitional spaces of the house, such as the screen at the bottom of the staircase, or the curved perforated metal screen at the master bath closet. Paradoxically, their surreal hyperfunctionalism subverts the modernist sensibility it initially appears to embrace. Beneath the modernist zeal for hygiene and function lurks a fascination with the subliminal effects of hyperfunctionalism.

Although not as elaborate as the transitional spaces of the house, Annie Dalsace’s boudoir concentrates many hyperfunctional and redundant features found elsewhere within the house to erotic effect. The boudoir is a connective space in the tradition of the eighteenth-century boudoir. Located on the second floor, between the gynecological offices below and the bedrooms above, it has two entries, one of which opens into the husband’s study next door through a sexually suggestive set of staggered doors, and the other gives onto the bedroom above by an equally suggestive mobile ladder-stair that is concealed within the ceiling when not in use (Figure 16.5). Other mobile elements include a service hatch to the kitchen and the daybed which is on a pivot. Mirror, windows, and metal panels shift the light and view to create a
visual play of translucence, reflection, transparency, and opacity. The play of mirrored, clear, and translucent glass in the boudoir, as elsewhere in the house, creates the odd sensation of being in two places at once, suspended between worlds, of self and other, inside and out, private and public, making this meeting place of the domestic and clinical an intimate experience.

**The erotics of narrative space**

Le Corbusier’s well-documented fascination with the veiled sensuality of the Arab city is transformed in his villas into spatial narrative. Far from the draped, candelit, horizontal spaces of the eighteenth-century boudoir, Le Corbusier’s interiors are exposed, sun-drenched, open-air, transparent spaces in which the formerly hidden – the boudoir, the stair, the dressing room, the bathroom – are expressed in free-standing curving volumes, modeled in light and shadow along which the eye may freely roam. The rounded mysterious forms that punctuate his *plan libre* and that are encountered in his *promenades architecturales* create a sense of anticipation. Even as certain views are framed, there is always something else peripheral to our vision, glimpsed, half-hidden.

Le Corbusier writes in his early travel journals of the intense sensual beauty of the clandestine *espace arabe*, the expansive intimacy of the mosques, the hidden courtyard, walled gardens, and cemeteries of Turkey. He sketched the dome-filled horizons of Istanbul, their entries, interiors, massing, and façades in plan, section, and perspectives, showing how they meld with the dense continuous texture of the Turkish street:

> you enter by a little doorway of normal human height: a quiet small vestibule produces in you the necessary change of scale so that you may appreciate, against the dimensions of the street and the spot you come from, the dimensions with which it is intended to impress you [. . .] you are in a great white marble space filled with light. Beyond you can see a second similar space of the same dimensions, but in half-light and raised on several steps (repetition in a minor key); on each side a still smaller space in subdued light; turning round, you have two very small spaces in shade. From full light into shade, a rhythm. Tiny doors and enormous bays. You are captured, you have lost the sense of common scale. You are enthralled by a sensorial rhythm (light and volume) and by an able use of scale and measure, into a world of its own which tells you what it set out to tell you. What emotion, what faith!²⁸

What he conveys in words and drawings is a sense of the sublimity of space that combines light and volume into rhythmic narrative. In his rhapsodic description of the Green Mosque in Broussa, Le Corbusier describes the essentially erotic and transformative experience of the mosque that culminates in a sense of illusion and transcendence.
in a sense of extraordinary freedom, the boundlessness of enclosure, anticipating the excitement and emotion of his own *promenades architecturales* of the Villa Savoye.

Set alone in a field under bright sunlight, the Villa Savoye seems to float above the landscape, its ground floor cast in shadow. It has the quality of a dream, even in Le Corbusier’s reflection, “a box in the air [. . .] in the middle of a prairie. [a] suspended garden. . . .” Within its deceptively simple container, a complex idiosyncratic world has been staged in the villa. Its eroticism is veiled, its functionalism a lure. Despite the exposed structure and the long bands of window, little of this building is wholly revealed. Its relationship to nature has been inverted in the suspended interior garden. The curtain walls and ribbon windows present a neutral screen to the world, a kind of blankness that creates a sense of tension and anticipation, a mysterious presence more typical of the erotics of the surrealist *objet poétique* than the purist *objet type*.

It is interesting to note that the private quarters of M. and Mme de Savoye, however, were not completed as Le Corbusier originally planned. Le Corbusier designed the de Savoye’s bedroom, boudoir, and bathroom within the curved walls of the roof garden29 as a series of fluid spaces with few partitions. Here they would have been hidden in plain sight, their sculptural presence a prominent feature of the façade from all viewpoints. In the final plan, the master apartment was located on the first floor in the shape of an “L” adjacent to their son’s bedroom. It was divided into four spaces: bathroom, dressing room, bedroom, and boudoir.

As in the historical boudoir, this boudoir is also a transitional space, in this case between a covered terrace and the bedroom. Although its interior is formally minimal – radiator replaces fireplace and the previously elaborate dressing-table has been reduced to a simple ledge over which one looks onto the interior garden – its visual relationship with the terrace and views is complex and playful, a series of inversions that are typical of the theatricality of the historic boudoir. Dramatizing a perspectival effect, the interior of the wall that connects terrace and boudoir is painted a bright wheelwright blue. “For Le Corbusier, [the boudoir] marked the end of the interior *promenade architecturale*, a point where, by turning around, the visitor can make out the large living room on the other side of the garden-terrace, as if it were the house across the way.”30 Likewise, the view of its interior window from the interior terrace and living room also toys with our perception of inside and out, near and far, large and small.

What overtly erotic features are lacking in the boudoir can be found in the bathroom (Figure 16.6). The sensuality of M. and Mme Savoye’s bathroom in the villa is in marked contrast to the cell-like and ascetic boudoir. In this room we find functionality aestheticized and celebrated as sensuous sculpture. Hard, shiny tile walls and floors create a sense of continuous spatial flow
The sensual eroticism of the Villa Savoye bathroom contrasts with the cell-like and ascetic boudoir.
that is no longer illusory, but literal, by virtue of the open plan; the skylight and ribbon windows bring nature inside, and the tiled chaise links bedroom and bathroom. Borrowed from the Turkish bath, and influenced by the chaise longue Le Corbusier designed in collaboration with Charlotte Perriand the same year, this undulating form celebrates the sensuality of human form. The overt sensuality, spatial ambiguity, and anthropomorphism characteristic of earlier erotic spaces is here transformed by the modernist sensibility of health, hygiene, and light. Its features combine to create a quality of intensity, otherworldliness, suspension, and an “ineffability,” which Le Corbusier called “l’espace indicible,” a poetic spatiality reminiscent of the sensual, immersive, and oneiric boudoir.

Conclusion: an erotics of space

For a time, the boudoir became the locus of psychic relatedness in a divided world, providing the physical and psychological space for the negotiation and sometimes subversion of rigid sexual and social systems from within. Whether constructed by women for themselves as a space for repose and reflection, or designed to assert power through seduction, or to provide an escape from social convention, the boudoir was an incubator of ideas, a transitional space and vessel of transformation. Its evolution highlights the shifting roles of women and suggests the influence of feminine values on the spatially integrated, visually dynamic, and programmatically flexible modernist house.

The story of the boudoir challenges the negative stereotyping of commonly held feminine traits of ambiguity, otherness, ephemerality, mystery, and seductiveness, and restores to these traits a more positive value based on an understanding of their underlying force – the protean relational feminine principle of eros which consciously or unconsciously is an intrinsic part of both female and male psyche and desire alike.

To what degree did the amorphic and indeterminate nature and purpose of the female boudoir enrich and inform the spatial character, open plan, and visual dynamics of the modernist house? What role, conscious or unconscious, might it have played in the development of Le Corbusier’s plan libre, Loos’ Raumplan, and the surreal elaboration of the transitional spaces of Chareau’s Maison de Verre? There is little direct evidence of female influence in these projects, but of their male progenitors’ commitment to relational thinking, their personal engagement with female clients and collaborators, and their appreciation of the power of ambiguity, ephemerality, mystery, and seductiveness, there is little doubt.

While the intimate and erotic effect of the historical boudoir was achieved by the artful dissolving of distinctions and the blurring of boundaries between architecture and space, inside and out, public and private, by an intertwining of form, surface, and light, and through an elaboration or excess of
aesthetic invention, a stripped-down version of these same principles infuses the organization and aesthetics of the modernist house. Yet even as the boudoir – symbol of the feminine, the aesthetic, and the sexual – was colonized by the modernist vocabulary of function, hygiene, and transparency, its erotic sensibility asserts itself in the intense aestheticism, visual and spatial ambiguity, sensuous materials, and almost palpable handling of space and light that characterizes the twentieth-century modernist house, suggesting a more fluid gendered dimension resonating within modernism an erotics of space that continues to resonate in the sensual abstraction and informe sensibility of modernist architecture today.33

Notes
I wish to thank the UCLA Center for the Study of Women whose support enabled me to participate in the SAH conference from which this collection evolved. Thanks also to Anthony Vidler for his encouragement and guidance during my tenure in the Masters program at UCLA.

2 Robin Evans wrote of the “carnality of the matrix plan of connected spaces” that are typical of domestic architecture before the advent of corridor planning. See “Figures, Doors and Passages” in Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997. I am suggesting that the old matrix plan was recuperated by high modernists in the free plan.
3 For a discussion on the relationship between architecture and eroticism, see Bernard Tschumi’s essay “Architecture and Transgression” in Architecture and Disjunction, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996, in which he describes architecture as “the ultimate erotic act,” having “the same status, the same function, and the same meaning as eroticism . . . a double pleasure that involves both mental constructs and sensuality.”
4 Le Corbusier’s book of 1948, New World of Space, documenting in his own work the interplay between the abstract and the organic, captures all the enthusiasm and spirituality behind this quest.
8 1989, directed by Milos Forman.
12 The upholsterer in the eighteenth century was the equivalent of an interior designer.
13 Lilley, “The Name of the Boudoir.”

15 The central idea of my thesis (UCLA, 2001) is that underlying modernist spatiality is an erotic sensibility and a way of making space which, for lack of existing terminology, I call an “erotics of space.”


17 Ibid., p. 74

18 See Beatriz Colomina, “The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism,” in Beatriz Colomina (ed.), *Sexuality and Space*, New York: Princeton Architectural Space, 1992, pp. 73–128. It is not known what role Herr Muller played in the programming and decoration of her boudoir, although with the opening of the Adolf Loos Study and Documentation Center in Prague, it is hoped that more may be known soon.


20 Although Loos never defined his concept of the Raumplan, it is interesting to note that his references to it as “sensed space” and a “chess game in space” suggest that it was a haptic as well as an intellectual construct, with a sense of strategy and play, all features of the erotic. See Yehuda Safran and Wilfried Wang (eds), *The Architecture of Adolf Loos*, London: Arts Council of Great Britain and the authors, 1986, p. 72.


25 The Dalsaces were Chareau’s dear friends as well as his patrons. The metal craftsman, Louis Dalbet, worked in collaboration with Chareau on the design of all the steel elements.


30 Ibid., p. 88.

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