

Research paper

Dwelling in Conflict: Redesigning the Home to Rethink Family and Society

Carlotta Cossutta * 

Università degli studi di Milano, ITALY

*Corresponding Author: carlotta.cossutta@unimi.it

This paper is part of the special issue: [Feminist spatial practices for social equality](#)

Citation: Cossutta, C. (2026). Dwelling in conflict: Redesigning the home to rethink family and society. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(2), Article 17. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/19065>

Published: August 26, 2026

ABSTRACT

This article critically re-examines the domestic space through the lens of feminist, decolonial, and affect theory, centering on Cini Boeri's *Domestic Project* as a case study for rethinking architectural, relational, and political dimensions of the home. Far from being a neutral or private refuge, the home is presented as a deeply ideological and contested site where gendered norms, labour relations, and social reproduction converge. Drawing from Italian feminist activism—particularly the movement for wages for housework—the analysis underscores the role of domestic architecture in naturalising women's labour while systematically excluding them from spatial decision-making. Through engagements with theorists such as Silvia Federici, bell hooks, Lauren Berlant, and Leslie Kern, the text explores how care, intimacy, and subjectivity are produced and governed within domestic infrastructures. The essay argues for a radical reconfiguration of domestic space as a political act, capable of disrupting heteronormative, capitalist, and patriarchal systems. It highlights the importance of feminist design practices in imagining homes that foster autonomy, relational plurality, and collective care. Ultimately, the home emerges not only as a site of structural domination but as a space of potential transformation—where new modes of living, relating, and resisting can be cultivated.

Keywords: feminist architecture, domestic labour, care infrastructure, gender and space, social reproduction

At the centre of this article lies Cini Boeri's *Domestic Project*, presented at the 1986 Triennale, a provocative housing model that reimagined coupledom through autonomy rather than fusion. The project's symmetrical layout—two independent wings joined by a shared central space—challenged the dominant vision of cohabitation as the renunciation of personal space and was quickly labelled in the Italian press as a 'marriage killer'. Far from a mere architectural experiment, Boeri's proposal illuminated how domestic design encodes social norms of intimacy, gender and labour, and how architecture can unsettle them.

Starting from this case study, the article situates *Domestic Project* within the broader history of feminist critiques of the home and private space. Scholars such as Hayden (1981, 1985), Sparke (1995), and more recently Kern (2020) have demonstrated that the home is not a neutral refuge but a political space where gender roles and labour relations are reproduced. Building on this tradition, I argue that Boeri's intervention exemplifies how architecture can function as a site of feminist critique, revealing the home as a contested infrastructure of care, autonomy and social reproduction.

A central claim of this contribution is that the home can be understood as a social and material infrastructure grounded in intimacy (Berlant, 2016). This conceptualisation highlights how the physical and symbolic

construction of domestic spaces reflects and reinforces norms of gender, family and labour while also holding the potential for subversion and reimagination. Building on this tradition, feminist and decolonial approaches further illuminate how intimate experience is conditioned by structural inequalities that traverse the domestic and public spheres.

The Italian Movement for Wages for Housework (Dalla Costa, 1972) serves as a key historical lens for this analysis, framing the home as a site of both labour and resistance and challenging traditional divisions between the public and private spheres. By rethinking living arrangements, femininity and the political role of women, the movement illuminates how the home operates as both a workspace and a political battleground. These feminist interventions reveal how domestic spaces, far from being neutral or apolitical, are deeply implicated in systems of oppression and offer opportunities for resistance and reimagination (hooks, 1984).

Critically, the reconfiguration of domestic spaces also invites a rethinking of the family as a social institution. By disrupting the spatial and symbolic associations between the home, family and societal reproduction, new possibilities emerge for envisioning relationships that are not bound by traditional norms of gender or reproductive roles (Cooper, 2017). Thus, the home becomes a site where the very definitions of intimacy, care and social belonging are contested and reshaped (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). As a social infrastructure, it functions both as a reflection of societal norms and as a locus for challenging and transforming them.

The contribution of this article is twofold. First, it foregrounds the *Italian context*—particularly the movement for wages for housework and the emergence of ‘diffused feminism’—to show how domestic architecture both reflected and resisted the political struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. Second, it reconsiders Boeri’s design through the lens of feminist and decolonial theory, highlighting the home not only as an ideological apparatus but also as a potential site of transformation. In this sense, the essay connects the architectural to the relational and political, suggesting that rethinking the domestic space is inseparable from reimagining family and society (Kiratli Acar, 2024).

The article proceeds in three movements. The first examines Boeri’s architectural intervention alongside feminist critiques of traditional domestic arrangements; the second turns to the Italian campaign for wages for housework and the material dimensions of domestic labour; and the third explores theoretical reconfigurations of intimacy and care through affect and infrastructure theory. Together, these sections argue that revisiting the home as a site of autonomy, conflict and care is essential to challenging persistent gendered inequalities and to envisioning alternative forms of living.

DOMESTIC PROJECT

At the foundation of every home design lies an understanding of human needs—both physiological and psychological. These needs correspond to spatial dimensions, both metric and ideological, and thus to the social dimensions of the individuals who inhabit them (Boeri, 1985, p. 7).

This principle guided *Domestic Project*, presented by Cini Boeri at the 1986 Triennale, a model house that sought to respond to the evolving dynamics of intimacy and coupledness.

The project was explicitly conceived for a heterosexual couple—a normative framework that reflected its cultural moment in Italy during the 1980s. Yet, its architectural configuration implicitly questioned the assumptions underlying heterosexual domesticity. The plan featured a shared central area (kitchen and living room) connected to two symmetrical wings, each containing bedrooms, studies, relaxation areas and bathrooms. This mirrored arrangement enabled the partners to decide how and when to share time, while preserving separate, autonomous zones—‘connected but never completely overlapping.’ Cohabitation no longer implied the dissolution of personal space, but rather a conscious negotiation of difference.

Such a conception of intimacy radically departed from the dominant model of the fused couple, in which spatial and emotional thresholds were effaced. Feminist and queer theorists have long highlighted how heterosexuality is less a neutral orientation than a prescriptive institution. Adrienne Rich’s seminal essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1980) argued that the heterosexual couple form naturalises women’s dependence and obscures structural inequality, while Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970) exposed how intimate relationships serve as key sites of patriarchal reproduction. Butler (1990) further showed that heterosexuality, like gender itself, is performatively reiterated through norms that appear natural. Boeri’s design can be read in this light as an architectural critique: it denaturalised the fused heterosexual couple by staging separation as equally fundamental to intimacy.

This interpretation finds resonance in contemporary empirical studies. Research on Italy shows how heterosexual unions remain marked by unequal distributions of care and labour. Menniti et al. (2014), in their study of families where mothers work, demonstrate that women continue to bear the brunt of domestic responsibilities despite formal equality. More recently, Meggiolaro (2024) highlights that even among cohabiting unions, household labour allocation reproduces entrenched gender asymmetries. In this sense, Boeri’s architectural proposal directly confronted material inequalities embedded in the heterosexual couple form.

The symmetrical design also reflected Boeri's broader rejection of rigid spatial typologies. Rather than relying on predetermined layouts—entrance, kitchen, living room, corridor—the project prioritised the analysis of inhabitants' specific needs. This approach emphasised adaptability and flexibility, foregrounding design as an open-ended process rather than a prescriptive blueprint. Such flexibility aligns with broader feminist critiques of the home as a disciplinary space. Wajcman et al. (1991) showed how built environments encode normative assumptions about gender, authority and privacy, while Vallerand (2021) has argued that queer perspectives on architecture expose and destabilise identity-based assumptions, particularly those tied to heterosexuality as an unquestioned norm.

The reception of the project in Italy further underlines its political charge. The press soon dubbed it a 'marriage killer,' revealing how deeply the ideal of the fused, heteronormative couple remained entrenched in public discourse. This backlash also testified to the stakes of architectural design in the social reproduction of family life: when space disrupts normative intimacy, it becomes a terrain of ideological conflict. The comparison with more recent analyses, such as Steiner's (2023) work on women architects designing for heterosexual families, underscores the historical significance of Boeri's intervention. While Steiner shows that architectural responses often tended to accommodate rather than subvert normative roles, Boeri's project proposed a radical rethinking of how intimacy and autonomy could coexist spatially.

In this sense, *Domestic Project* can be read not simply as an architectural experiment but as a feminist intervention that resonates with the Italian context of the 1970s and 1980s, marked by legal reforms on family law, divorce and abortion, and by ongoing struggles around domestic labour. By troubling the naturalisation of the heterosexual couple as the unquestioned centre of domestic life, Boeri offered a spatial imaginary of intimacy grounded in autonomy, plurality and negotiation.

FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF DOMESTIC SPACE IN ITALY

This way of conceiving domestic space is deeply rooted in feminist critiques of the home and domesticity. Dolores Hayden (1985), for instance, famously demonstrated how the material organisation of houses contributes to women's oppression while also offering a ground for imagining alternative forms of life. Her proposals—shared kitchens, cooperative housing, and domestic arrangements responsive to all inhabitants rather than to the nuclear family—situated architecture at the centre of feminist politics.

In Italy, similar debates emerged at the intersection of activism and design. As early as the mid-1960s, Marisa Rodano convened a group of women architects to support the Union of Italian Women (UDI) in developing proposals for Rome's *Piano Regolatore Generale*. Rodano recalls:

I had gathered, perhaps with the help of architect Beata Barucci, a group of women graduates in architecture: Vittoria Ghio Calzolari, Bianca Marchesano (the wife of director Nanni Loy), Lisa Ronchi Torossi, and others. I had approached them to ask for professional input on social services and on how to frame UDI's proposals for the Rome PRG from a female perspective. It didn't work at first—they were kind, but not very engaged. The breakthrough came when I got them talking about their own lives. It was a revelation: these well-educated, professionally skilled women—pioneers in a male-dominated field—were not only facing enormous barriers to advancement but also grappling with the new dilemma of 'balancing' work and family life (Rodano, 2010, p. 102).

The UDI (*Unione Donne in Italia*), founded in the aftermath of the Resistance through the merger of partisan women's groups, became a major actor in post-war reconstruction and in campaigns for equal pay, social services, and women's rights (Tola, 2016). In the 1960s the organisation also began to contest the invisibility of unpaid domestic labour. One of its early initiatives was the campaign for a *pensione alle casalinghe* (pension for housewives), which sought recognition of domestic work as socially valuable labour (Unione Donne Italiane, 1955). In the same years, UDI pushed for an expansion of nursery services (*asili nido*), framing them not merely as practical support for working mothers but as part of a broader political vision that acknowledged the dual burden women bore in combining paid employment with domestic responsibilities. These struggles linked women lived experiences to institutional demands for redistribution and recognition.

Historians have shown how these campaigns resonated with broader European debates on women's domestic and reproductive labour. Betti (2022), for example, has documented how the Italian feminist press, including *Noi Donne* (UDI's magazine), denounced the exploitation of industrial homeworkers and connected their struggles to a critique of invisible domestic labour. Sarti (2014) has similarly emphasised that domestic and care work has long been naturalised and undervalued, and that feminist activism played a crucial role in making its hidden dimensions visible.

Such initiatives foregrounded women's historical position within domestic space, strongly connected with the idea that the home is a place of work and activity that shapes both the spaces and the people who inhabit them. In this sense, the Italian case echoes Hayden's call to take domestic experience as a starting point for

architectural critique while situating it within the socio-political struggles of the 1970s and 1980s: declining birth rates, persistent gender wage gaps, and a cultural climate that still defined women primarily through family roles.

Against this backdrop, Boeri's *Domestic Project* appears both timely and radical. By affirming autonomy within the couple, it materialised the feminist demand to recognise difference without subsuming it under unity. At a moment when Italian feminists were denouncing the invisibility of domestic labour and questioning the centrality of the heterosexual family, Boeri translated these debates into architectural form. Her symmetrical plan not only resisted the ideology of fusion but also anticipated the feminist critique of the family as an institution of social reproduction.

The feminist rethinking of domestic space has often engaged theoretical tools to interrogate how intimacy and social reproduction are structured. In this sense, architecture does not merely provide a neutral setting but actively shapes relations of power, embodiment, and care.

Foucault (1977) analysis of disciplinary spaces remains a useful starting point: the home, like the school or the factory, functions as an apparatus that regulates behaviours and distributes roles. Yet rather than treating domestic space only as a site of surveillance, feminist scholars have emphasised its potential for reconfiguration. Grosz (1995), for instance, has shown how space and embodiment are mutually constitutive, and how architectural arrangements can reinforce or disrupt gendered subjectivities. In a similar vein, Colomina (1992) has demonstrated how modern architecture reorganised privacy and visibility, particularly in relation to women's roles in the home.

Recent feminist and queer urban studies extend this critique by highlighting the home as a site of both oppression and possibility. Kern (2020) insists that domestic space reproduces gendered inequalities but can also be reimagined as a terrain of collective care and solidarity. Butler (1990) theory of gender performativity further clarifies how norms of heterosexual intimacy are reiterated through spatial practices, rendering the fused couple form natural and unquestioned.

These perspectives shed light on Boeri's *Domestic Project*. By introducing separation into the very structure of the home, the project unsettles the normative expectation of intimacy as fusion. It suggests that autonomy and relationality are not opposites but co-constitutive, and that architecture can materially support this balance. In dialogue with Italian feminist activism—which denounced the invisibility of domestic labour and demanded recognition for women's autonomy—Boeri's design becomes legible as a feminist intervention: not an abstract theory of space, but a built proposition for reconfiguring the infrastructure of everyday life.

By reshaping domestic space, feminist architects and theorists seek to subvert its disciplinary function. Their work challenges the home's implicit role in enforcing binary roles, heterosexual norms and invisible care labour. This is not about prescribing alternative blueprints but about making space malleable—responsive to diverse lives and relational needs. It is a spatial politics of transformation in which design becomes both a site of critique and a medium of possibility. As Lefebvre (1974) reminds us in *The Production of Space*, space is not merely a backdrop to social life—it is a product of it and, in turn, a condition of its reproduction.

It is no coincidence, as Minoli and Aragona (1977) observe in the Italian feminist magazine *Effè*, that although women have always been materially and symbolically associated with the domestic space, everything concerning the broader politics of housing and architectural design—including aspects such as quantification, size, internal configuration, the relationship with the city, and the potential inclusion of social services—has been determined exclusively by men, such as politicians, economic actors, urban planners, and architects.

By contrast, rethinking the very structure of homes and cities could benefit from a feminine perspective—one that differs not by nature but by virtue of a history that has confined women within domestic walls, making them more experienced in the dynamics of everyday life that unfold there. Moreover, it is precisely women's exclusion from public space that enables them to reimagine and redesign it, with the potential to avoid reproducing new forms of exclusion.

In this context, then, female difference is conceived both as a product of history and as the outcome of a spatial organisation that is inherently symbolic. Domestic and public spaces, through their design, discipline women's behaviours and help shape what they become. Thus, to redesign these spaces is also to imagine different subjects, to envision alternative ways of living and to relate that challenge to existing norms.

This position is echoed by Marta Lonzi, a member of Rivolta Femminile, who left the Faculty of Architecture in protest of traditional conceptions of design. In her 1982 essay, *the architect out of themselves*, she wrote:

One of the most despairing aspects I encountered—and still encounter—is that architects, never questioning themselves, produce conjectures that lack any connection to subjective truth and experience. Their designs appear unanchored, generating solutions others must live with—often inadequate ones. It is not theory that leads to meaningful solutions, but human contact, which reveals them as unique and unrepeatable, grounded in the singularity of each person. (Lonzi, 1982, p. 66)

This view calls for a radical revision of the relationship between architect and inhabitant. It demands a shift away from vertical, abstract models of expertise and towards a participatory practice that centres the voices and needs of those who dwell within the spaces being designed.

In Boeri's project, the abstract model being challenged is that of a couple or family founded on uninterrupted togetherness—a vision of intimacy without thresholds or gaps. By contrast, the equilibrium between private and communal spaces proposes a conscious interdependence between two subjects, opening up space for coexistence in varied numbers and configurations. It reveals the ambivalence at the heart of the couple: it thrives not on sameness but on difference, which must be granted both time and space to develop.

With this same attention to spatial optimisation, functional furnishings must be conceived of as flexible and modular, allowing inhabitants to assemble and adapt them over time according to personal needs. As Boeri herself argues,

It is not enough to think of economy simply as minimizing living standards—we must also think of economy as reducing the labour of managing the home. In minimalist housing, more than anywhere else, it is essential to provide specialized furnishings, services, and a spatial ratio that eliminates unnecessary movement. (Boeri, 1985, p. 16)

In such minimalist designs, the duplication of spaces takes on new significance; it is no longer a luxury but a necessary means of enabling relational choice. It signals that intimacy is not a default condition but a dynamic and situated practice—one that architecture can either restrict or make possible.

Marriage killer

The controversy around *Domestic Project* must be situated in the political climate of the 1980s, a decade in which Italian feminism, though less visible in the streets than in the 1970s, continued to shape cultural debates on intimacy, family, and domestic labour. Legal reforms on divorce (1970, confirmed in 1974) and abortion (1978) had already challenged the indissolubility of marriage and women's prescribed role as mothers, while feminist groups denounced the invisibility of unpaid housework and the persistence of patriarchal family structures. Within this shifting landscape, Cini Boeri's proposal assumed particular significance: by translating feminist demands for autonomy and recognition into spatial form, *Domestic Project* resonated with ongoing struggles over the meaning of living together.

The press's response made this clear. Newspapers quickly dubbed the model a 'marriage killer,' a label that captured both fascination and alarm. The symmetrical layout of the dwelling—two equal and independent wings connected by a common area—was perceived not as a resource for negotiating intimacy but as a direct threat to marital stability. The fear it provoked testified to how deeply entrenched the cultural ideal of the fused, heteronormative couple remained in 1980s Italy. In this sense, the polemical nickname underscored the project's political charge: architecture here did not simply design space but intervened in the ideological reproduction of gender relations, unsettling what was still considered 'common sense' about love, marriage, and cohabitation.

In *Amore e pregiudizio*, Elena Gianini Belotti (1988) offers a striking critique of the family structure, arguing that it instills "a grave deformation that underlies all affective relationships: that affection means primarily the possession of one being, invested with power, over another who has none" (p. 22). Before the family law reform, the husband was legally the head of the family, empowered even to use force to enforce obedience. Under the guise of romantic love and complementarity, this framework concealed and legitimized a profound asymmetry of power. Within the family, as Belotti notes, "relations between parents and children are marked by the sense of legitimacy in parental possession over their children" (p. 47). In this light, the family appears less as a private refuge and more as a social technology of control—a primary site for the normalisation of authority, hierarchy and submission.

Against this background, the 1980s marked a significant turning point in Italian feminist thought. In 1982, the Centro Culturale Virginia Woolf opened its annual activities with a manifesto entitled *L'indecente differenza* (Bocchetti, 1995), and in 1983, the influential *Sottosopra verde* issue—published by the Libreria delle Donne di Milano (1983)—rejected static separatism and proposed a politics of *affidamento* (entrustment). This laid the groundwork for the landmark 1987 publication *Non credere di avere dei diritti* [*Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*] (Libreria delle Donne di Milano, 1987). That same year, the feminist philosophical collective Diotima published *Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* (Diotima, 1987), while Lea Melandri (1987) contributed to the magazine *Lapis* with a cartography of women's experiences as a resource for renewed feminist inquiry.

These texts exemplify a broader shift from organized political activism to what scholars have described as "diffused feminism"—a network of practices rooted in lived experience and everyday action rather than in collective demands or representative politics. As Franca Bimbi writes:

Diffused feminism designates a mode of subjectivation organized around innovative conduct, not always aligned with the collective actor's demands, but resonant with its method of gender deconstruction and with the imperative of women's self-expression (As cited in Calabrò & Grasso, 2004, p. 14).

One of the most compelling articulations of this shift comes from the Libreria delle Donne di Milano in *Sottosopra verde* (1983), in which a rejection of masculine-centered emancipation gives way to the notion of a "common world of women." As the authors write:

We succeed when we weave a network of preferential relationships between women, where the experience associated with being a woman is strengthened through mutual recognition, and new ways of translating this experience into social reality are invented. [...] To be in the world while remaining in relation with other women means giving substance to what the prevalence of masculinity denies: the original fact of being women rather than men (Libreria delle Donne di Milano, 1983, p. 3).

They articulated a decisive shift away from static separatism and toward a politics of *affidamento* (Libreria delle Donne di Milano, 1983, p. 6), understood as an asymmetric yet empowering relationship between women. The issue also offered a radical critique of emancipation, reframing it not as liberation but as assimilation into a male-defined social order:

Social existence is won in a sexual contest of men. When discrimination cases, women can enter this race, but it remains a race of men. [...] As long as the partiality of being man/woman does not exist in the substance of social and cultural life, society is mutilated and, for us, mutilating (Libreria delle Donne di Milano, 1983, p. 10).

This articulation of feminist subjectivity—based not on equality with men but on the affirmation of sexual difference—was also mapped onto spatial imaginaries—rethinking not only political identity but also the material forms of living, dwelling and caring.

However, this transformation was not without tension. Lesbian and separatist feminists voiced concerns that the feminist movement was losing its oppositional force:

We have personally witnessed, as lesbians and feminists, how certain themes have been lost along the way. In recent years, the feminist movement has gone through a deep crisis—many women have gone back home. (...) What has happened to the struggle against the patriarchal system within feminism itself? (Calabrò & Grasso, 2004, p. 119)

This concern about the re-domestication of women's lives echoed critiques of the heterosexual couple form and its symbolic centrality. Despite growing awareness of the constructed nature of gender roles, domestic labour remained a largely unchallenged paradigm—unpaid, invisible and unequally distributed.

In this sense, *Domestic Project* was not simply a provocation at the level of spatial form but a radical gesture in the ongoing redefinition of intimacy, labour and relational autonomy. By challenging the spatial coding of unity in favour of reversible proximity, Boeri's (1985) architecture materialised a key feminist insight—the private sphere, far from being neutral or apolitical, is a contested terrain where social norms are enforced and power is reproduced. Federici (2012, p. 7) and Fortunati (1995, p. 9) both emphasise that domestic space is not a passive background to social life but a strategic site of capitalist accumulation and gendered discipline. Their work is especially relevant to the Italian context of the 1980s, a moment when feminist politics shifted from legislative confrontation to more diffuse practices of subjectivation and relational transformation. As theorists deeply rooted in the autonomist and post-workerist traditions that emerged in Italy, both authors foreground the invisible centrality of domestic and affective labour to capitalist valorisation, helping to articulate a critique of reproduction that resonates with the broader feminist interrogation of the private sphere. While Federici contributes to the international diffusion of the feminist critique of the wage and the commons, Fortunati develops a conceptual apparatus capable of connecting sexuality, communication and labour within the domestic sphere—anticipating later feminist engagements with immaterial and affective economies (Federici, 2019, p. 45; Fortunati, 2013, p. 149).

To redesign the home, then, is to intervene in the very mechanisms through which subjectivity, dependency and inequality are constructed. Where Boeri's design interventions made visible the need for spatial autonomy and differentiation within domestic life, the feminist autonomist movement exposed the invisible economic structures underpinning that life. In both cases, the house became a lens through which to critique broader systems of capitalist and patriarchal control and to imagine new forms of relational life not based on fusion but on freedom and reciprocity. Ultimately, *Domestic Project* did not 'kill' marriage—it exposed its underlying architecture. It revealed the family not as a natural or inevitable institution but as a construct maintained through spatial, emotional and legal arrangements.

Nevertheless, the critique of the couple remained central—both in public debate and in private life—especially as issues like work–life balance gained prominence. Yet, even as the fusion model of intimacy was questioned, domestic labour remained a structural constant. The home continued to function as a gendered paradigm, organising time, labour and affection along persistent lines of inequality. Thus, *Domestic Project* not only envisioned new spatial configurations but also provoked anxieties about the shifting ground of intimacy and gender, laying bare the extent to which architecture, social reform and feminist critique were—and still are—entangled in the ongoing redefinition of relational life.

HOME AS A PLACE OF WORK

A distinctive feature of the Italian campaign for wages for housework was its dual emphasis: a rigorous economic critique of unpaid labour and a pragmatic concern for improving women's everyday lives. In a 1973 report, *Lotta Femminista* articulated demands for wages for domestic labour, shorter working weeks for all, full bodily autonomy, and the legalisation of abortion. Through neighbourhood and housewives' committees, the movement organised grassroots campaigns on accessible abortion, affordable public transport, and against rising living costs. At stake was not only the recognition of domestic labour as work, but also its radical refusal. Rooted in autonomist Marxist theory, particularly Mario Tronti's concept of the 'refusal of work' (Tronti, 1966), Italian feminists reframed domestic labour as a site of gendered exploitation central to capitalist accumulation.

Federici, in *Wages Against Housework* (1975), made this claim stark: the socialisation of women as caring mothers and devoted wives is a political imposition masquerading as natural affection. The demand for wages was never meant as reformist remuneration but as a strategy to denaturalise reproductive labour and reveal its structural role in capitalism. Leopoldina Fortunati's *The Arcane of Reproduction* (1995 [1981]) extended this analysis by showing how reproductive labour—including emotional, sexual, and communicative work—was integral to capitalist valorisation. Both authors, deeply rooted in the Italian context, displaced the home from its presumed neutrality, exposing it as a key terrain of political struggle.

Federici's well-known formulation—'they call it love, we call it unpaid labour' (Federici, 1975), finds a literal counterpart in the experiences of paid domestic workers, especially migrants, whose labour makes visible the emotional and moral expectations embedded in care. Arlie Hochschild's distinction between emotional labour (performed for pay in a public setting) and emotion work (conducted in private, unpaid) is challenged by the case of domestic labour, which straddles both categories. Paid domestic work occurs within the private sphere, where affect has use value but limited exchange value. This blurring of boundaries destabilises the neat division between private and public emotion economies, exposing the unique contradictions of care labour in the home (Hochschild, 1983). This conceptual blurring between emotional labour and unpaid emotion work has led feminist theorists to rethink care not as a natural disposition but as a form of socially necessary labour. Rather than viewing care as a spontaneous extension of feminine identity, scholars such as Tronto (1993) have argued that care is a structured practice that underpins the functioning of society yet remains unequally distributed and persistently undervalued. The case of domestic labour challenges Arlie Hochschild's original dichotomy by revealing how emotional performance in the home—despite being paid—continues to rely on assumptions of selflessness, availability, and moral responsibility typically associated with unpaid care. As Hirata (2021) emphasizes, care work is not only about providing affection but about organizing, anticipating, and managing the needs of others—tasks that require skills, time, and effort, yet are rarely recognized as such. In this context, the domestic space becomes a site where the ideology of love obscures the reality of care as labour, reinforcing the invisibility and naturalization of gendered service.

The Italian trajectory of the 1980s–1990s makes these critiques even more legible. During the 1980s Italy shifted from a country of emigration to a net receiver of immigrants; inflows grew rapidly and reconfigured the social organisation of care within households (van Hooren, 2010). Feminised migration increased and a private market of domestic and elder care expanded—frequently informal or irregular—so that many tasks previously performed without pay inside the family were externalised to paid domestic workers, often migrant women. Empirical work documents this turn: studies on female immigration and employment in Italy show the consolidation of *colf* and, from the 1990s, *badanti* as a distinct segment of the labour market tied to household care (Tognetti, 2004; Catanzaro & Colombo, 2008). Analyses of the domestic sector also highlight low contractual protection and high rates of contribution evasion since the oil-crisis years, conditions that persisted as demand for in-home care grew (Sarti, 2004, 2017). By the early 2000s, large regularisation campaigns revealed the scale of long-standing informal arrangements in domestic work and live-in elder care (van Hooren, 2010).

Within this landscape, Gutiérrez-Rodríguez's (2010) notion of affective labor is particularly illuminating. In her work *Migration, domestic work and affect: A transnational perspective on care*, she shows that paid domestic work—often performed by migrant women in private homes—is a nexus where emotions, embodiment, status, and legal precarity are organized by migration regimes and racialized/gendered expectations rather than by neutral market forces. Read against the Italian case, where residence status, informality, and family-based hiring have long structured the sector, her argument clarifies why "home" is never merely private but co-produced by immigration policy, citizenship hierarchies, and cultural norms.

Parreñas's (2001) analysis of global care chains further specifies these dynamics. In *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work*, she traces how transnational circuits channel migrant women—Filipinas among others—into domestic and care work in Southern Europe, including Italy, under assumptions that naturalize caregiving as women's work while keeping employment conditions precarious and semi-private. Her framework helps to read the Italian 1990s: the growth of live-in elder care (*badantato*), stepwise migration into household service, and the stratification of domestic labor along axes of gender, class, race, and legal status.

These perspectives do not displace the autonomist feminist critique; they amplify it in a specifically Italian register. As domestic labour inside the family remained ideologically 'natural' and largely unpaid, its externalisation to migrant workers made care simultaneously more visible (as employment) and more obscure (as intimate, 'private' service). In this sense, the feminist denunciation of unpaid housework and the contemporary realities of migrant domestic labour are two sides of the same coin: both expose how the home operates as an infrastructure that organises labour, dependency, and inequality through spatial and legal forms.

Boeri's *Domestic Project* can be read in dialogue with this constellation of critiques. While activists and historians revealed the economic and affective structures underpinning domestic life—and while migration transformed who performed care—Boeri's design disrupted the ideology of fusion by embedding autonomy into the material fabric of the home. Both strands of intervention—political and architectural—exposed the house as a machine for the reproduction of social relations, while also opening space for reimagining it as a site of autonomy, reciprocity, and collective resistance.

In this context, domestic labour functions as a social infrastructure: it links the public and private, the state and the intimate. Its performative power produces not only material care but normative definitions of family, gender and nation. It plays a symbolic role in the reproduction of national identity—especially in the management of migrant domestic workers—and in defining which forms of intimacy are deemed legitimate.

Lauren Berlant deepens this understanding by framing reproductive labor as a form of "intimate infrastructure"—a social commons that sustains collective life through non-sovereign, affective relations. In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (1997), Berlant argues that intimacy does not rely on a shared identity but on "being with" others in fragile proximity. It is political because it mediates access to care, value, and recognition. Berlant reminds us that intimacy has been privatized in liberal society, enshrined in the figure of the White, middle-class, heterosexual nuclear family. This model obscures broader solidarities and conceals the political dimensions of home life, making intimacy appear apolitical when it is central to economic and governmental structures (Berlant, 1998, 2016). As feminist theorists have argued, the domestic is not merely a private site of emotion but one where global and intimate dynamics intersect, shaping subjectivity and labor alike (Pratt & Rosner, 2006).

Architecture and domestic space are not neutral containers but active producers of gendered norms. Floorplans, spatial separations and the invisibility of collective services encode a politics of gender that renders care private and feminised (Hayden, 1981). Reimagining the home as a care infrastructure forces us to see how housing arrangements condition possibilities for relational care. Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) expands the concept of care into speculative ethics, highlighting its role not only in human relationships but also in multispecies, technological and ecological networks. She positions care as both a material and an affective infrastructure essential to sustaining life (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 12). Smith (2005) argues that care must be reconceptualised as a political and spatial ethic capable of counterbalancing the dominance of market logics, particularly in the context of domestic life and social reproduction. Legal and policy frameworks are increasingly being challenged to account for the centrality of care, as argued by Harding et al. (2017), who explore how cycles of devaluation and revaluation of care shape social and institutional norms.

When housing is treated purely as private property, care becomes individualised, and the absence of public support renders domestic care invisible. As feminist scholars have noted, this invisibility reinforces a link between care and dependency, framing self-care as the norm and casting those in need of care as failures. Making care visible—material, collective and valued—requires rethinking domestic space as a site of labour and political practice. Federici (2012) argues that the historical enclosure of the commons was also an enclosure of women's bodies and homes and that reclaiming domestic space requires a struggle for collective autonomy and solidarity networks. Similarly, Fortunati stresses the need to rethink domesticity not as a 'natural' condition but as a constructed site of capitalist accumulation, one that must be politically contested.

Following Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1990), we can also understand domestic labour as a performative practice that reiterates normative ideals of femininity, family and care. Rather than expressing preexisting truths, domestic practices work to naturalise gendered labour roles. The ideologies that circulate between the public and private spheres promote certain expressive relations—love, community, patriotism—while marginalising others driven by appetite or survival. Intimacy, then, becomes a communicative process shaped by public ideologies and private negotiations. In this regard, hooks's (2000) work challenges us to politicise love as an active, collective force capable of disrupting structural domination.

In this way, the home emerges as an intimate—political site, one that houses both structural domination and everyday resistances. It is where power is enacted and contested through routines, affections, and spatial arrangements. The home takes shape as an infrastructure in which women, through their labor, function as its essential cogs. As Minoli and Aragona (1977) argue:

The woman, entirely absent as a decision-making subject, is nevertheless fully assimilated into the very concept of the home, to the extent that she becomes the "ingredient," the "indispensable gear" of the housing

machine (*machine à habiter*). The unquestioned presence of "a woman in the home" (a natural consequence of the absence of collective services) represents, through spatial and functional ghettoization, the first level of privatization enacted by men. It corresponds to the cultural model of the home as a "possession" and a "container of goods and people." (p. 37)

Given that women are entirely excluded from decision making in all matters concerning major urban and typological choices, it can be said that the evolution of the housing system has been a direct consequence of men's choices and of male-centered historical development (Minoli & Aragona, 1977). This critique aligns with a broader body of feminist scholarship that interrogates the spatial politics of domesticity and urban design. Scholars such as Hayden (1980) have shown how the built environment reinforces patriarchal divisions of labour, embedding gendered expectations into the very fabric of homes and neighbourhoods. Similarly, Massey (1994) argued that space is not a neutral container but is produced through social relations and power dynamics, making the home inseparable from broader systems of socio-economic control. Expanding on these foundations, Kern (2020) introduces the concept of the 'feminist city,' highlighting how urban spaces are not only shaped by gendered assumptions but also actively exclude and marginalise women, particularly in terms of mobility, safety, and access to decision-making. Kern calls for a radical reimagining of urbanism that prioritizes care, inclusivity, and intersectionality, thus challenging the historical exclusion of women from shaping the environments they inhabit. In this light, the feminisation and privatisation of domestic labour are not merely cultural residues but are structurally inscribed in urban and architectural systems that must be critically dismantled. A feminist approach to housing and urban planning, therefore, is essential for envisioning more equitable and democratic modes of living. The paradox lies in the fact that while the home is idealized as the woman's 'natural' domain—her supposed place of fulfilment and identity—she has historically been denied any meaningful role in its conception, design, or governance, rendering her both central to and excluded from the very space she is presumed to embody.

The metaphor of the woman as an indispensable but invisible cog underscores how domestic labour is rendered structurally necessary yet ideologically erased. The home, far from being a neutral or private refuge, emerges as a space where gendered forms of labour are both spatially fixed and socially naturalised. The 'unquestioned presence' of a woman in the house is not simply a cultural expectation but a product of the absence of collective services and of broader sociopolitical design choices that ghettoise women within domestic roles.

By highlighting the complete absence of women from urban planning and typological decision making, Minoli and Aragona (1977) point to the patriarchal legacy embedded in the very form and function of modern housing. The evolution of the domestic sphere is presented not as a universal or neutral process but as one shaped by male historical agency—reflecting and reinforcing a broader system of gendered power.

Thus, the home is not only a place to be analysed but also a lens for analysing society. To imagine a different domestic space—one that interrupts rather than reproduces hierarchies—is to claim both a new politics of infrastructure and a new politics of intimacy. This critique reinforces the feminist argument that architecture and urban planning are not merely technical disciplines, but ideological practices that produce and perpetuate social hierarchies. As Penner (2005) and Rendell (2000) have argued, the domestic interior is a key site where gendered relations are spatialised and reinforced, often through seemingly neutral decisions about layout, access, and privacy. The gendered invisibility in housing design is not incidental but rooted in the exclusion of women from processes of spatial decision-making—an exclusion historically justified by the ideological separation between public (male) and private (female) spheres. Italian feminist scholars, such as Ongaro Basaglia (1979), have also denounced how modern housing typologies encode normative gender roles, silencing women's needs and perspectives under the guise of functional neutrality. Rethinking the home thus requires a political and disciplinary shift: one that recognises the house not only as lived space, but as a designed artifact shaped by power relations—and therefore open to reimagining through feminist spatial practice.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined Cini Boeri's *Domestic Project* against the backdrop of Italian feminist debates on domestic labour, intimacy, and autonomy. The analysis has shown that the project's significance lies not only in its architectural innovation but in its political capacity to render visible and transform the structures through which the home organises social reproduction.

A first aspect concerns domestic labour. Italian feminist campaigns of the 1970s—most notably the wages for housework movement—denounced the family as a workplace in which women's labour was rendered invisible and unpaid. Thinkers such as Federici (1975) and Fortunati (1995 [1981]) framed the home as a crucial site of capitalist exploitation, where love and care were mobilised as ideological covers for work. In this light, *Domestic Project* can be read as an architectural analogue to those critiques: by refusing the absorption of individuality into a

fused domestic unit, it disrupted the naturalisation of women's labour as selfless devotion and instead staged cohabitation as a negotiated relation between autonomous subjects.

A second-dimension concerns intimacy and the construction of the couple. The press's branding of the project as a 'marriage killer' revealed how profoundly the Italian cultural imagination of the 1980s was invested in the idea of intimacy as fusion. By designing a house where autonomy and shared life coexist without hierarchy, Boeri destabilised the heterosexual couple as the unquestioned centre of the domestic sphere. In doing so, she echoed feminist demands for recognition of difference within relationships and anticipated later theoretical critiques—such as Butler's (1990) analysis of performativity—that expose the reiterative force of normative intimacy. Rather than dissolving the couple, *Domestic Project* suggested that intimacy could be reconstructed on the basis of equality and reciprocity.

A third link concerns the intersection of architecture and politics. The Italian context was marked by simultaneous processes: feminist critiques of unpaid domestic labour, the rise of migrant domestic work, and the ongoing struggle to redefine women's roles in family and society. In this conjuncture, Boeri's design intervened materially in questions usually addressed abstractly. The symmetrical wings of the house were not only architectural solutions but political statements: they challenged the privatisation of care, the gendered asymmetry of domestic responsibilities, and the conflation of intimacy with dependence.

The contribution of this article is therefore twofold. First, it foregrounds the Italian case—too often marginalised in feminist architectural historiography—by demonstrating how local debates on domestic labour, reproductive rights, and the restructuring of care inform the reading of Boeri's design. Second, it argues that architecture can serve as a critical medium within feminist politics, capable of making visible and contestable the infrastructures that sustain inequality.

Finally, these reflections extend beyond their historical moment. Today, persistent gender inequalities in housework, the feminisation of migrant care labour, and demographic challenges in Italy confirm that the home remains a crucial site where autonomy, dependency, and reproduction are organised. Revisiting Boeri's *Domestic Project* and Italian feminist thought allows us to see that rethinking domestic space is inseparable from reimagining family, care, and society. Far from being a 'marriage killer,' Boeri's design suggests the possibility of a more equitable and plural domesticity—an invitation that continues to resonate in the present.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the editors of this special issue for the opportunity to contribute and for their support, and the reviewers for their helpful comments

Funding

This research was funded by the Department of Philosophy "Piero Martinetti" of the University of Milan under the Project "Departments of Excellence 2023-2027" awarded by the Ministry of University and Research (MUR)

Ethical statement

This study is a systematic review of previously published literature and did not involve human participants, animals, or the collection of primary data. As such, ethical approval and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval were not required for this research.

Competing interests

The authors declare that there are no competing interests regarding the publication of this paper.

Author contributions

CC is the only author responsible for all aspects of the research and manuscript preparation

Data availability

N/A

AI disclosure

No generative artificial intelligence tools were used in the design of the study, data collection, data analysis, or interpretation of the findings. AI-based tools were used to assist with grammar, wording, and clarity during the

revision process. The author reviewed and edited the text to ensure accuracy and accepts full responsibility for the final content.

Biographical sketch

Carlotta Cossutta is a researcher in political philosophy at the “Piero Martinetti” Department of Philosophy at the University of Milan. Her work focuses primarily on feminist and queer philosophy and the history of women’s political thought, including through her involvement with the Politesse—Politics and Theories of Sexuality research centre (University of Verona).

Disclaimer/Publisher’s note

The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Lectito Publications and/or the editor(s). Lectito Publications and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to persons or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.

REFERENCES

- Belotti, E. G. (1988). *Amore e pregiudizio*. Rizzoli.
- Berlant, L. (1997). *The Queen of America goes to Washington City: Essays on sex and citizenship*. Duke University Press.
- Berlant, L. (1998). Intimacy: A special issue. *Critical Inquiry*, 24(2), 281–288. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448875>
- Berlant, L. (2016). The commons: Infrastructures for troubling times. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34(3), 393–419. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775816645989>
- Betti, E. (2022). A gendered history of precarious work. *Genealogy*, 6(3), 64. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy6030064>
- Bocchetti, A. (1995). *L’indecente differenza*. In A. Bocchetti, *Cosa vuole una donna. Storia, politica, teoria. Scritti 1981/1995*. La Tartaruga
- Boeri, C. (1985). *Le dimensioni umane dell’abitazione: appunti per una progettazione attenta alle esigenze fisiche e psichiche dell’uomo*. FrancoAngeli.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Calabrò, A., & Grasso, L. (2004). *Dal movimento femminista al femminismo diffuso: storie e percorsi a Milano dagli anni ‘60 agli anni ‘80*. FrancoAngeli.
- Catanzaro, R., & Colombo, A. (Eds.). (2009). *Badanti & co. Il lavoro domestico straniero in Italia* [Caregivers & co. Foreign domestic work in Italy]. FrancoAngeli.
- Colomina, B. (1992). The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism. In B. Colomina (Ed.), *Sexuality and Space*, Princeton Architectural Press (pp. 73–130)
- Cooper, D. (2017). *Family values: Between neoliberalism and the new social conservatism*. Princeton University Press.
- Dalla Costa, M. (1972). *Donne e sovversione sociale*. Marsilio.
- Federici, S. (1975). *Wages against housework*. Power of Women Collective.
- Federici, S. (2012). *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. PM Press.
- Federici, S. (2019). *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. PM Press.
- Fortunati, L. (1995). *The arcane of reproduction: Housework, prostitution, labor and capital* (H. Creek, Trans.). Autonomedia. (Original work published 1981)
- Fortunati, L. (2013). *The Meaning of the New Media*. Polity Press.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Pantheon Books. (Original work published 1975)
- Grosz, E. (1995). *Space, time, and perversion: Essays on the politics of bodies*. Routledge.
- Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, E. (2010). *Migration, domestic work and affect: A decolonial approach on value and the feminization of labor*. Routledge.
- Harding, R., Fletcher, R., & Beasley, C. (2017). *Revaluing care in theory, law and policy: Cycles and connections*. Routledge.
- Hayden, D. (1980). What would a non-sexist city be like? Speculations on housing, urban design, and human work. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 5(3), 170–187. <https://doi.org/10.1086/495718>
- Hayden, D. (1981). *The Grand Domestic Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hayden, D. (1985). *Redesigning the American dream: The Future of housing, work and family life*. Norton.
- Hirata, H. (2021). The centrality of women’s work and the sexual and international division of care labor: Brazil, France, and Japan. In H. Hirata & N. A. Guimarães (Eds.), *Care and care workers: A Latin American perspective* (pp. 61–75). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51693-2_4
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press.
- hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. South End Press.

- hooks, b. (2000). *All about love: New visions*. William Morrow.
- Kern, L. (2020). *Feminist city: Claiming space in a man-made world*. Verso Books.
- Kıratlı Acar, S. (2024). Screen use in parenting: The issue of "Digital Abandonment" among Turkish families. *ISophos: International Journal of Information, Technology and Philosophy*, 7(13), 1-16.
- Lefebvre, H. (1974). *La production de l'espace*. Anthropos.
- Libreria delle donne di Milano. (1983, Januari). *Più donne che uomini. Sottosopra verde*. <https://www.libriadelledonne.it/publicazioni/sottosopra-verde-piu-donne-che-uomini-gennaio-1983/>
- Libreria delle donne di Milano. (1987). *Non credere di avere dei diritti: La generazione della libertà femminile nell'idea e nelle vicende di un gruppo di donne*. Rosenberg & Sellier.
- Lonzi, M. (1982). *L'architetto fuori di sé*. Scritti di Rivolta Femminile.
- Massey, D. (1994). *Space, place and gender*. Polity Press.
- Minoli, L., & Aragona, M. A. (1977, May). Ottica femminile in architettura [Feminine perspective in architecture]. *Effe*. <https://efferivistafemminista.it/2014/11/ottica-femminile-in-architettura/>
- Ongaro Basaglia, F. (1979). *La città del noi: Donne, salute, lavoro, istituzioni*. Einaudi.
- Parreñas, R. S. (2001). *Servants of globalization: Women, migration, and domestic work*. Stanford University Press.
- Penner, B. (2005). Researching female public toilets: Gendered spaces, disciplinary limits. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 6(2), 81-98.
- Pratt, G., & Rosner, V. (Eds.). (2006). *The Global and the Intimate: Feminism in Our Time*. Columbia University Press.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017). *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Rendell, J. (2000). *Gender, space, architecture: An interdisciplinary introduction*. Routledge.
- Rodano, M. (2010). *Memorie di una che c'era*. Editori Riuniti.
- Sarti, R. (2004). Domestic service in a global perspective: Gender, migration and social inequalities (18th–21st centuries). In E. van Nederveen Meerkerk, S. Neunsinger, & H. W. van der Linden (Eds.), *Domestic workers in the world: Histories, practices and policies*, Amsterdam, Netherlands: Aksant, 17-39.
- Sarti, R. (2017). Open houses versus closed borders: Migrant domestic workers in Italy. A gendered perspective (1950s–2010s). In E. Olivito (Ed.), *Gender and migration in Italy: A multilayered perspective* (pp. 39–59). Routledge.
- Smith, D. E. (2005). *Institutional ethnography: A Sociology for people*. AltaMira Press.
- Sparke, P. (1995). *As long as it's pink: The sexual politics of taste*. Pandora.
- Steiner, H. (2023). Between passion and possession: women architects and the houses they built for family, love and work. *Journal of Architecture*, 28(3), 327-353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2023.2197923>
- Tognetti, M. (2004). Lavoro e immigrazione femminile in Italia: Una realtà in mutamento [Work and female immigration in Italy: A changing reality]. In U. Melotti & M. Delle Donne (Eds.), *Immigrazione in Europa: Strategie di inclusione - esclusione* (pp. 153–182). Ediesse.
- Tola, V. (Ed.). (2016). *Fare storia, custodire memoria: (1945-2015) i primi settant'anni dell'UDI* [Making history, cherishing memory: (1945-2015) the first seventy years of UDI]. Futura.
- Tronti, M. (1966). *Operai e capitale*. Einaudi.
- Tronto, J. C. (1993). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge.
- Unione Donne Italiane. (1955). *Pensione alle casalinghe* [Manifesto]. Archivio digitale UDI. <https://archiviodigitale.udinazionale.org/pensione-alle-casalinghe/>
- van Hooren, F. (2010). When families need migrants: The exceptional position of migrant domestic workers and care assistants in Italian immigration policy. *Bulletin of Italian Politics*, 2(2), 21–38.
- Vallerand, O. (2021). Messing up the domestic: Queer bodies expanding architectures. *Somatechnics*, 10(3), 397–415.