

Research paper

## Homemaking and Recreating: The Domestication of Institutional Architecture

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores how homemaking and programming operated as spatial tactics that reshaped institutional architecture in early 20th-century Latin America. Through a close reading of photographs from welfare, health, and educational facilities, it identifies domestic gestures not as ornamental excesses but as acts of architectural agency. These gestures softened the institutional rigidity and created spaces of care within structures originally designed for control. In parallel, programming joy or ‘recreating’—through gardens, music rooms, parlours, play areas, and beach outings—introduced activities that demanded new spatial forms. These additions complicated institutional planning, often driven by female workers and caregivers. Together, homemaking and recreating operated as a form of architectural domestication that both contested and nuanced Foucault’s concept of discipline. Rather than pure spaces of surveillance and control, these institutions reveal an undercurrent of affect, joy, and relational care, quietly rewriting the architectural script from within.

**Keywords:** welfare, care, Latin America, women’s history, architecture

The photograph used as [Figure 1](#) emerged during my research on women and care architecture in the early 20th century. It was taken at the Ophthalmological Clinic and Hospital of Buenos Aires around the 1910s. The image shows a room—or perhaps a terrace—with a nurse, a nun, and three patients. In the background, a blindfolded woman sits in a chair. In the foreground, a girl with downcast eyes displays no remarkable expression. Behind her, however, another girl wearing dark goggles appears in a relaxed, natural posture. I believe she is smiling.

It is uncommon to find joyful expressions in photographs from this period. People were accustomed to remaining still due to the long exposure times required by early photographic technology. Holding a smile for such a duration was difficult, making genuine smiles in early 20th-century images rare and immediately striking. This is particularly true when examining photographs of institutional spaces, where one is frequently confronted by the austere and sombre atmosphere characteristic of disciplinary architecture (Foucault, 1995). Why, then, is a blind girl in a hospital, under the care of a stern-looking nurse, smiling? What is the cause of her joy? Is the nun, too, perhaps subtly smiling? This discovery became a source of inspiration: joy must play a meaningful role in spaces of care. How was such joy spatially produced? How did women—the overwhelming majority of workers in these institutions—transform disciplinary environments into something closer to a home?

**Figure 1**

*Ophthalmological clinics and hospital, Buenos Aires, 1910*



This article forms part of a broader study that explores the spatial dimensions of women's involvement in social care practices—including education, health, and child-rearing, among others. Historically, such practices have been framed under the concepts of welfare, beneficence, and charity, and since the nineteenth century they have been largely delegated to both religious and laywomen across much of the Western world. In this article, the term Latin America is employed as a conceptual category rather than as a comprehensive designation of the region in all its diversity. My research is centred on Chile and extends to a limited group of countries with which Chilean women maintained documented connections. These connections took shape through the press of emerging feminist movements, the circulation of letters, expert visits, and congresses organised both by care institutions and women's organisations. The countries considered here share certain characteristics: they had been independent for over a century, were Spanish-speaking, and were deeply rooted in Catholic traditions—namely, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Peru, Mexico, Bolivia, Colombia, and Chile. Since colonial times, the most impoverished sectors of the population often lived as tenants on rural estates, receiving housing and food as part of their compensation. However, as they migrated to urban centres in search of better opportunities, they became part of the proletariat—earning wages often insufficient to meet their basic needs. Families took refuge in various types of precarious housing—informal, unhygienic dwellings. Nonetheless, it is important to note that significant differences exist among these countries, both in their political histories and in their urban configurations. In some, such as Chile and Peru, the Catholic Church exerted strong influence, whereas in Argentina and Mexico, the institutions of beneficence developed within a more secular framework. Cities like Buenos Aires, which in the first half of the twentieth century surpassed two million inhabitants—marked by explosive growth and a strong cultural influence of European migrants—stand in sharp contrast to cities like Asunción, which by 1950 had not yet reached 200,000 inhabitants. The similarities and differences in the processes of metropolisation of Latin American cities are brought into sharp relief in Almandoz (2024). These disparities decisively shaped the capacity to produce infrastructures of care, yet they did not erase certain common structural foundations of the issue. In the cities, poverty became publicly visible and could no longer be confined to the private sphere.

From the early nineteenth century onwards, charitable institutions began to proliferate in response. Although many of these initiatives were originally founded by male associations, by the turn of the twentieth century most of this work had shifted into the hands of upper- and middle-class women.<sup>1</sup> Through this involvement, women developed a profound understanding of the conditions of poverty, and it was through their testimonies that these realities gained broader public visibility. The evolution of charity from a religious duty to a matter of public policy is well encapsulated in the emergence of the concept of public beneficence—literally, the practice of doing good through the use of public resources and in a more institutionalised manner. For European trajectories of this evolution, see Hennock (2007); for the United States, Trattner (1999); and, foregrounding women's roles, Spain (2002). Beyond the canonical narrative, valuable studies examine sites as diverse as Australia (Dickey, 2020), Jerusalem under Ottoman rule (Singer, 2002), Argentina (Guy, 2009), and Chile (Ponce de León, 2012). As Christian charity gradually transformed into organised forms of social work and public welfare, the architecture of institutions such as schools, orphanages, hospitals, and mental asylums also evolved. The once-

<sup>1</sup> Among male-led charitable associations are Toynbee Hall (London, 1884), the St. Vincent de Paul Conferences (Paris, 1833), and the Hermandad de Dolores (Santiago, 1815).

neutral, convent-inspired plans began to give way to more functional and programmatically specific spatial arrangements. This transformation reflected broader shifts not only in the practices of social care but also in the architectures that hosted them.

Within this changing landscape, it may be argued that women developed a particular form of spatial knowledge derived from their experiences in caregiving roles. Whether working within private or state-run institutions, women both encountered and helped implement the spatial adaptations required by the emerging paradigms of care. These institutions became domains where women could exercise expertise and make decisions—spaces where they could, in effect, exercise power. This paper argues that women, in these contexts, enacted what some scholars have termed architectural agency, and that they did so primarily through two interrelated strategies: homemaking and recreating. Iris Marion Young (2005) introduces the concept of homemaking to describe women's agency in shaping domestic space. She frames it not merely as the performance of household chores, but as the intentional production of space through acts of care and the arrangement of objects—practices that enable the construction of identity and the enactment of life. The second strategy identified here is that of recreating, which refers to the spatial and temporal organisation of leisure activities. This term is used deliberately to suggest a dual meaning—both the provision of recreation and the creative reimagining of institutional space. In architectural discourse, programme refers to the allocation and organisation of functions and spatial sequences; here, recreating is proposed as a subtle, transformative programming act rooted in care.

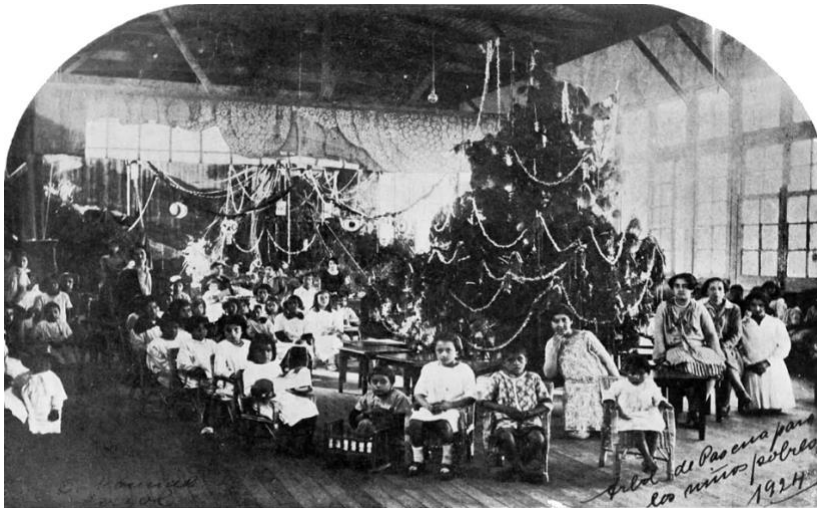
Providing a sense of home and joy to those in care was a practice deeply aligned with the Judeo-Christian roots of charity—*caritas*, from the Latin for dearness or love. In stark contrast, modern surveillance architecture sought to render institutional spaces functional, hygienic, austere, and devoid of sentimentality. Modern approaches to care were also highly systematic, designed to suppress individuality, control large populations, and optimise outcomes. Visual records of early 20th-century charitable institutions often reflect this disciplinary ethos: images depict electrotherapy sessions, outdated medical instruments, and children with shaved heads subjected to militarised routines or trained for industrial labour. Yet, interspersed among these grim portrayals are strikingly elaborate scenes of joy and celebration—such as a lavishly decorated Christmas tree in a small, impoverished school (Figure 2). These tableaux, often theatrical and exaggerated, raise compelling questions: How was joy incorporated into spaces shaped by disciplinary rationality? And what role did women play in facilitating this joy? To address these questions, this study draws on a visual archive comprising hundreds of photographs sourced from promotional albums and specialised publications on public beneficence from the early 20th century. The analysis focuses on institutions from Argentina, Paraguay, Peru, Mexico, and Chile<sup>2</sup>. Through a close reading of photographs as historical documents (Burke, 2019), and by examining various spatial scales—from objects and rooms to bodies and institutional settings—it is possible to identify deliberate actions that shaped and qualified these joyful environments.

All of the examined documents serve a promotional purpose, and it is likely that the vast majority of the photographs they contain were posed. While some images clearly depict carefully orchestrated arrangements of bodies and settings, even those that appear spontaneous seem to have been deliberately staged. Given the explicitly advertising nature of these publications, it is reasonable to assume that only the most favourable aspects of institutional life were selected for visual representation. These photographs were intended to present each institution in its best possible light, thereby imbuing the images with significant symbolic value. The gender and identity of the authors of the accompanying texts remain largely indeterminate, with the exception of the Argentine *Álbum histórico* by Rodríguez and López (1910) and *Actividades femeninas* by Guérin de Elgueta (1928)—the latter being the only document explicitly authored by women and produced collectively. While the remaining sources also represent institutional collectives, their voices are unified under the authority of the institutions they promote. These institutions operated in a competitive landscape, seeking both public funding and private donations, which shaped their primary audiences and influenced the curated image they projected. Despite this inherent bias, the photographs remain valuable historical documents. They reveal the ideals that each institution sought to foreground, the attributes they deemed exceptional and worthy of admiration, and a shared repertoire of spatial materials and care practices that were both aspired to and symbolically promoted.

<sup>2</sup> The primary sources used to build the arguments of this article are: Rodríguez M. & López, V. (c.1910) *Álbum histórico de la Sociedad de Beneficencia de la Capital 1823-1910*. Buenos Aires: Lit. A. Bianchi; Dirección General de la Asistencia Pública Nacional (1918) *Memoria de la Dirección General de la Asistencia Pública Nacional 1915-1917*. Asunción: Talleres Gráficos del Estado; Sociedad de Beneficencia Pública de Lima (1913) *Álbum fotográfico*. Lima: Casa Editora M. Moral; *Puericultorio Pérez Aranibar*. (1930). Lima; *Revista enciclopédica de la beneficencia pública del Distrito Federal*. (1917). México: Departamento Tipográfico de la Escuela Industrial de Huérfanos; *Boletín de la Beneficencia Pública del Distrito Federal*. (1920-1922). México: La Beneficencia. Guérin de Elgueta, S. (ed.) (1928) *Actividades femeninas en Chile*. Santiago: Imprenta y Litografía La Ilustración. *La Congregación de las Hermanas de la Providencia de Chile*. (1924). Santiago: Imprenta San José.

Figure 2

*Normal school of Angol, a rural town in Chile, 1924*



## WOMEN ON ARCHITECTURE

This work is in dialogue with recent literature that brings care and architecture into relation (Lange & Schaad, 2022; Utting, 2024; Vaughan, 2019), adopting a more institutional, assistance-oriented construal of the concept, arguably closer to work recently curated by Grit Weber on Frankfurt's welfare architecture (Weber & Wagner, 2025). The research is also grounded in the concept of agency in architecture, understood as the potential for women to contribute meaningfully to architectural practice outside the bounds of formal professional recognition. It draws on the work of scholars such as Kathleen James-Chakraborty (2022) and Anne Hultzs (2022), both of whom propose that architecture should be regarded as a cultural product—shaped not by a singular creative mind, but by a collective process involving discourse, knowledge transmission, and everyday practices of inhabitation. Within this framework, agency resides in the circulation of ideas, the micro-practices of use and care, and the spatial interventions that often go unrecognised within conventional historiography. Hultzs, referencing Griselda Pollock's *Differencing the Canon* (1999), critiques the canonical narrative of art and architecture as enclosed within a masculine, hegemonic, narcissistic, absolute, and transhistorical paradigm. Pollock (1999, p. xiv) instead advocates for a strategy that “makes a difference in how we read art's [and, in this case, architecture's] histories,” thereby expanding the scope of feminist interpretation. Similarly, Joan Scott (1986, 2008, 2010) argues for the use of gender as a critical category of historical analysis, viewing it as a means to deepen and diversify historiographical approaches. This redefinition of architecture—beyond the narrow limits of professional production—makes it possible to recognise women's historical contributions to the discipline, particularly prior to their formal admission into architectural education. In this expanded view, women appear as patrons, informants, users, and active participants in the making of space. Paraphrasing Rosalind Krauss (1979), this approach positions architecture within an expanded field, opening new avenues for understanding how space is produced and by whom.

The omission of women as architectural agents constitutes not only a disciplinary and historiographical oversight but also a broader deprivation of their humanity. As Iris Marion Young (2005) argues—drawing on Martin Heidegger's thesis in *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* (1971)—to dwell in the world is to participate in the act of building, which in turn is a precondition for the emergence of thought and subjectivity. Heidegger posits that human Being (*das Sein*) is realised through the act of dwelling, and that this dwelling is inextricably linked to building. Building, therefore, is not merely a technical activity, but a foundational mode of being in the world. In this context, Young (2005, p. 122) writes:

*“If building establishes a world, if building is the means by which a person emerges as a subject who dwells in that world, then not to build is a deprivation. In the patriarchal gender system, men are the builders, and women are the nurturers of builders and the ornaments placed within their creations. As homeless themselves, women are deprived of the chance to be subjects for themselves.”*

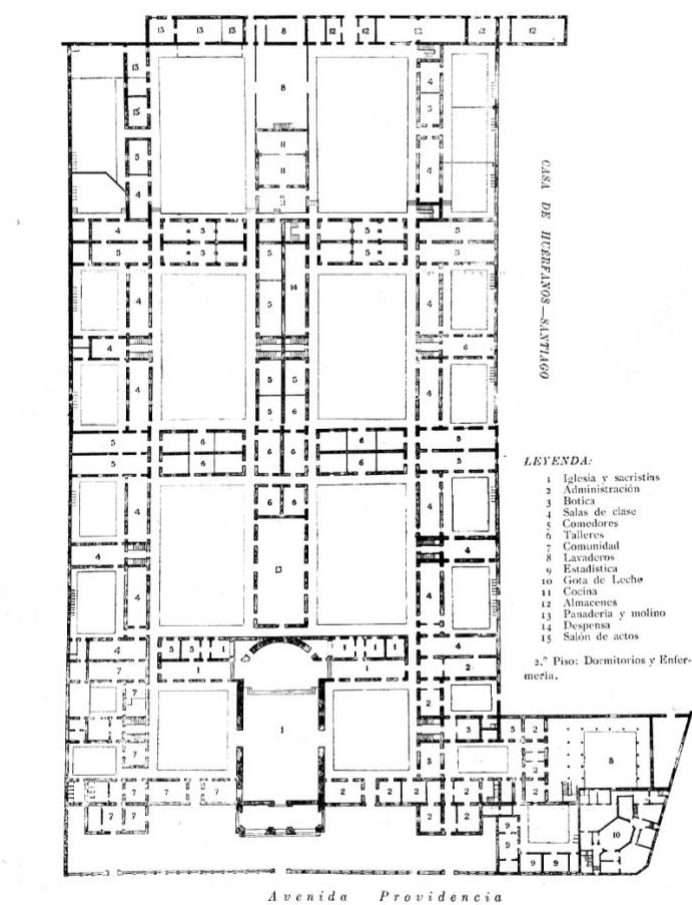
Young's reflections are part of a broader effort to reclaim the domestic sphere as a legitimate realm of feminine agency and resistance. She expands the meaning of homemaking—a term often burdened by its association with repetitive, alienating domestic labour. She critiques Simone de Beauvoir's dismissal of domesticity in *The Second Sex* (2007), where such tasks are framed as reproductive rather than productive, thus relegating them to the lowest rung of immanence. Young also engages with Hannah Arendt's (1998) categorisation of homemaking as part of the labour sphere, where activities are tied solely to biological necessity and fail to contribute meaningfully to the world. In contrast, young challenges these limitations by asserting that

homemaking, understood literally as making a home, carries a significant spatial and subjective agency. Among the various domestic tasks, she singles out decoration as a key practice in producing meaningful space. The placement and curation of objects within a private space form a “narrative of life,” reflecting and reinforcing the identity of the inhabitant (Certeau et al., 1998, p. 145). Thus, the care for objects and their arrangement becomes a form of preserving what is human—not in the linear temporality of transcendence, but in the cyclical temporality of care. bell hooks (2015) similarly view the home as a site of resistance and humanisation. For her, the domestic sphere—particularly within the African American experience—is not merely a retreat from the public realm but a political act of identity formation and healing. No matter how fragile or provisional, building a home becomes a radical gesture. Based on hooks' insights, Young further conceptualises homemaking as an empowering activity essential to the construction of self-esteem. This notion is particularly relevant in the context of care institutions, where the emotional and psychological well-being of patients—sick, orphaned, or mentally ill—is especially precarious. Michel de Certeau (1984) also contributes to this discourse by distinguishing between strategies and tactics of spatial production. Institutions deploy strategies to impose order through the arrangement of artefacts, while individuals respond with tactics—reappropriating, rearranging, or adding to their environments in subtle acts of resistance. These everyday practices, though often invisible, are fundamental to the lived experience of space and the assertion of agency within it.

However, modern institutional architecture stands in stark contrast to the idea of a home. Welfare establishments cannot all be categorised as ‘total institutions’ according to Goffman’s (1961) terminology. Yet, due to their vast, hygienic, and systematic nature, these institutions tended to standardise spaces and practices, often resulting in what Goffman refers to as the ‘mortification of the self.’ Standardisation, in this sense, led to depersonalisation, stripping away individuality. In his seminal work *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1995) argues that architecture plays a central role in the disciplining of bodies, shaping the behaviour of individuals through spatial design. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that new hygienist architectural typologies began to emerge. Up until the late nineteenth century, women’s social care work predominantly occurred within what could be classified as pre-modern architectural frameworks. These buildings, in terms of the relationship between form and function, were largely neutral. There was no clear correspondence between the architectural form and its intended use; spaces were generic and adaptable. The layout closely followed the structure of vernacular Latin American architecture: precincts of varying sizes enclosing a central patio, with surrounding galleries. The church was the only element that stood out, receiving special architectural treatment. This plan could be found in hospitals, schools, or convents, with only minor modifications. Buildings were designed to serve multiple functions, whether as cloisters, hospitals, orphanages, or schools, all following a similar spatial arrangement. **Figure 3** illustrates the floor plan of the Orphanage of the Nuns of La Providencia (*Casa de Huérfanos de la Divina Providencia*), built at the end of the nineteenth century in Santiago de Chile. The design adheres to the typical structure of an abbey: central courtyards, large rooms such as refectories, and individual cells of varying sizes. This architectural form remained prevalent for a considerable time due to its adaptability to the needs of large-scale social welfare institutions. Activities within these spaces were accommodated within this neutral, functional morphology, such as the sewing class of the *Casa de Huérfanos* of Buenos Aires happening in a corridor, as shown in **Figure 4**. The role of furnishings and objects was key in characterising these otherwise neutral spaces, lending them a sense of identity and purpose.

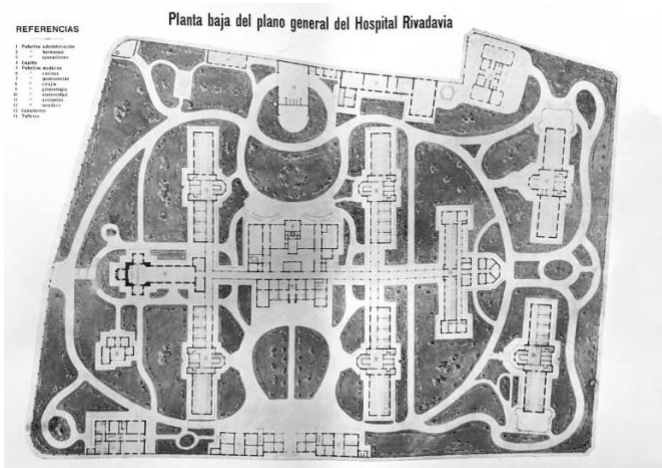
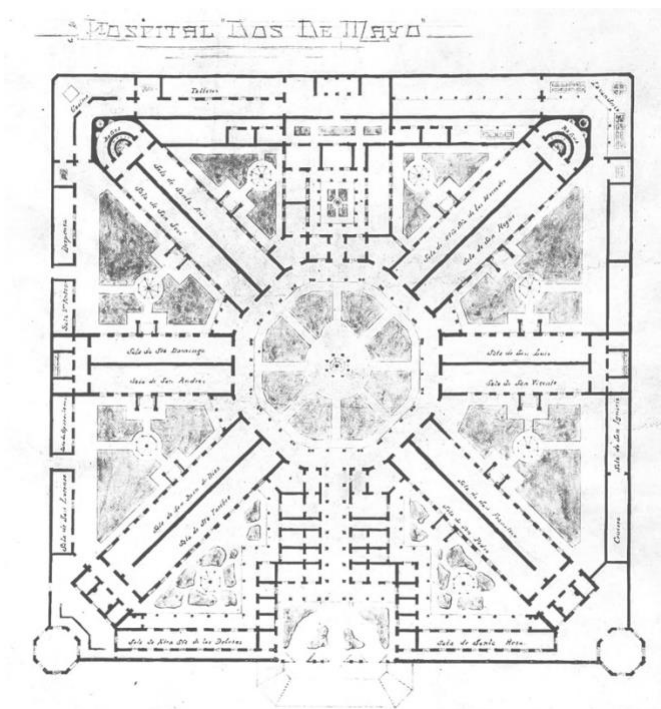
Hospital architecture, in particular, adopted the use of pavilions and gardens and began to specialise its architectural programme, as exemplified in the layout for Rivadavia Women’s Hospital in Buenos Aires (**Figure 5**), a model institution that aimed to embody modern advances. However, this design still embodied an inherent ambiguity between care and confinement, rooted in the perception of patients as subjects of charity rather than rights-bearing individuals. The design of the Hospital Dos de Mayo in Lima illustrates this point tellingly, almost comically, with its literal adaptation of Bentham’s panopticon, substituting the watchtower with a garden (**Figure 6**). As Foucault (1995) notes, modern architecture of institutional spaces was part of a broader set of disciplinary techniques, particularly evident in the design of schools and hospitals. These disciplinary spaces were planned to manage large numbers of bodies, with individuals organised in series and hierarchies. According to Foucault, discipline was achieved in space through “the art of distributions” – the strategic arrangement of individuals within a given environment (Foucault, 1995, p. 141). Two key techniques of control from Foucault’s framework are especially relevant here: the separation of different functions into distinct enclosures and circulations (the “principle of elementary location or partitioning”) and the specific, often unique, use of each space (the “rule of functional sites”) (Foucault, 1995, p. 143). These techniques, embedded within what is known as a programme in architecture, played a crucial role in shaping how spaces were organised and how they functioned within institutional frameworks.

**Figure 3**  
*Orphans house of the nuns of La Providencia (Casa de Huérfanos de la Divina Providencia), Santiago, 1880*



**Figure 4**  
*Sewing workshop at the orphans house for girls (Casa de Huérfanas), Buenos Aires, c. 1910*



**Figure 5***Rivadavia women's hospital, Buenos Aires, 1880***Figure 6***Dos de mayo hospital, Lima, 1913*

The architectural programme became a fundamental motive of the discipline's twentieth-century approaches. American architect Louis Sullivan (1896) was the first to assert that 'form follows function'. Drawing inspiration from nature, where change constantly leads to adaptation, Sullivan viewed modernity as a continuous movement towards renewal, with function serving as architecture's social commitment to that change. For Sullivan, change was synonymous with life. Similarly, Le Corbusier's 1923 manifesto *Towards an Architecture* celebrated the beauty of functional artefacts such as liners, aeroplanes, and automobiles (Le Corbusier, 2007). Louis Kahn (1961), on the other hand, suggested that "form" was a derivative of the function the building was meant to serve. One of Kahn's primary goals was to identify the form implied by a specific use. However, Kahn also noted that the programme itself was not architecture; rather, it was an instruction to architects tasked with transforming it into meaningful space (Ronner & Jhaveri, 1987).

In addition to the disciplinary discourse, during the first third of the twentieth century in Latin America, architects were primarily focused on style and were only beginning to engage with the early expressions of the Modern Movement within architecture schools. Latin American women, while still rarely entering the profession, were more closely tied to the concerns of institutional architecture due to their involvement in welfare activities<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> The first woman to earn the title of architect was the Brazilian Arinda da Cruz Sobral in 1914 (see Belarmino, 2024). However, Brazil stands as an extraordinary exception within the region's architectural landscape, with substantial

However, beyond analysing typologies in architectural plans, when examining photographs depicting life within these institutions, significant differences emerge in certain environments. I believe these differences reflect the influence of female architectural agency—the production of space through objects and actions.

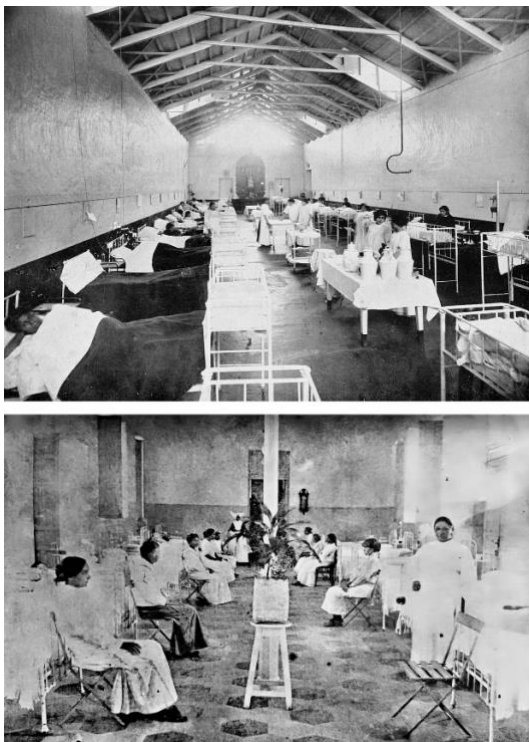
## HOMEMAKING AS PLACEMAKING

To identify homemaking as a tactic for the domestication of space, I have focused on a careful reading of the objects present in the photographs. Beyond the functional items, this aspect of the research examines what seems to be overlooked, at least in terms of the immediate goals of the institution, yet still serves to foster well-being. Some objects are symbolic, while others are related to specific actions. Both types appear to subvert the discipline and standardisation of institutional spaces. Symbolic objects represent the idea of a non-standardised personal identity, while others encourage actions that disrupt the passive behaviour typically expected within such spaces. These objects are subtle but significant.

For example, it is uncommon to find superfluous items in a pavilion-style dormitory, which, due to its scale, pragmatism, and hygienic focus, typically contains only the most basic elements. Therefore, the few objects that do appear—deliberately placed by someone to create a more welcoming atmosphere—stand out. A comparison of two pavilions illustrates this clearly: one from the Hospital Santa Ana in Lima and another from the National Hospital of Asunción (Figure 7). Both are women's pavilions: the Peruvian pavilion serves as a nursery, while the Paraguayan one is a surgical ward. The former is modest, aged, and austere, while the latter features a flowerpot, a pendulum clock, charming quilts, and bed frames with decorative details. The contrasting tiled floor further enhances the atmosphere, while the absence of windows in the Santa Ana ward contributes to a feeling of desolation. In these cases, the buildings themselves align with the ambience of the space, but it is the presence or absence of objects that most distinctly defines the environment. Both institutions were run by nuns. In Peru, however, women were excluded from paid positions in the public charity system until 1914; consequently, unlike in Asunción, there were no lay nurses (Peluffo, 2009). Perhaps the Peruvian nuns practised greater austerity, concentrating resources in the altar displayed on the back wall of the photograph—certainly not the only religious display in the building.

**Figure 7**

*Up: Maternity ward, Santa Ana Hospital, Lima, 1913. Down: Ward n° III, women's surgery, National Hospital, Asunción, 1918*

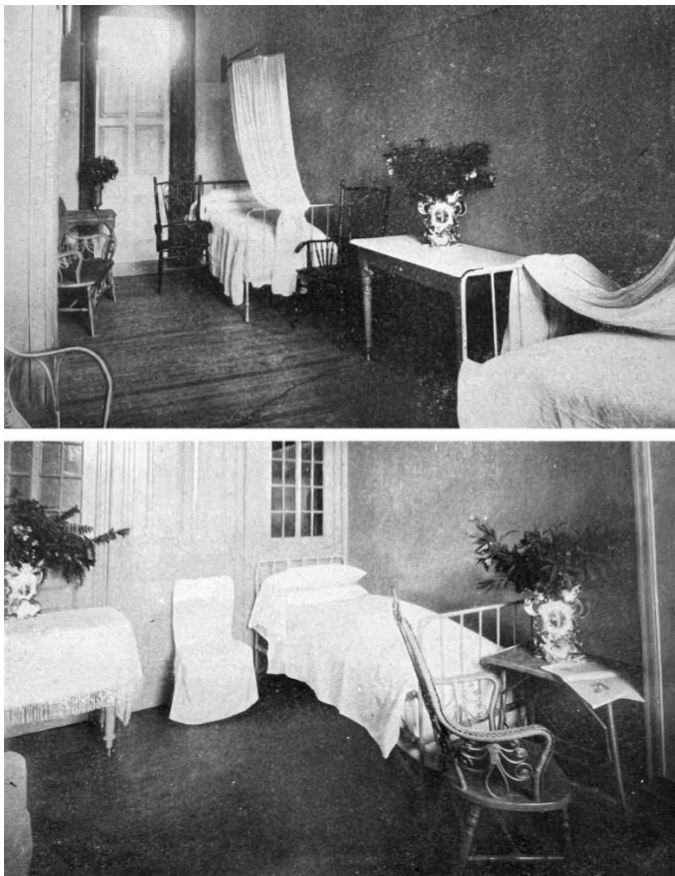


contributions to both built work and theory. Da Cruz Sobral was followed by Julia Guarino in Uruguay (1923), Filandia Pizzul in Argentina (1927), Doris Clark in Peru (1928), and Dora Riedel in Chile (1930). These women were true pioneers, carving out limited spaces within a profession historically dominated by men.

In contrast, the paid private wards (*pensionados*) for long-term stays in physical and mental health institutions were designed to resemble residential spaces, where decoration was given more freedom. These photographs (Figure 8) also served to promote the institution's paid dormitories, which generated significant income for the establishments. Notably, the flower vases in the images are identical—perhaps the same vase appears repeatedly in each photograph. The furniture varies in style: while the bed frames are standard, there are also bentwood and wicker chairs. Reading or writing tables suggest a more comfortable stay, with time allocated for leisure. The textiles—fluffy pillows, light veils, and delicate tasselled tablecloths—help to soften the atmosphere of space. This resemblance to a real home may have helped ease concerns about boarding, particularly for women with mental health conditions, by creating a sense of warmth and comfort. As in most Argentine institutions, this women's asylum relied on female staff—primarily nuns and lay nurses—and was overseen by a commission of women responsible for inspecting the facility. It was a large, model institution designed to accommodate 1,200 patients.

**Figure 8**

*Private paid ward (Pensionado), National Hospital for Insane Women (Hospital Nacional de Alienadas), Buenos Aires, c. 1910*



Environments for men and women were distinct, even in institutions led by women, and this difference is especially evident in clothing. The Children's Hospice in Mexico, under the direction of Electa Bastar—one of the few civilians mentioned in the local Beneficence press (*Boletín de la Beneficencia Pública del Distrito General*) and holding a position of authority—advocated for children's recreation. In 1921, she co-founded the Society for Children's Recreation (*Sociedad de Recreo del Niño*). This stood in stark contrast to the activities promoted by the Orphans Industrial School in the periodicals of the time. While Mrs. Bastar organised toy collections and parties for the children, at the Industrial School, the children were trained in carpentry, the fabrication of clay sewage pipes, and printing. In the Hospice under Bastar's leadership, the girls were dressed in pure white with ornamental ribbons in their hair, while the boys wore military-style buttoned jackets (Figure 9). Both outfits were elegant, yet the boys' attire was more practical, tailored for action.

A notable difference between Mexico and Argentina is that, in the latter, women were visibly in charge. In Mexico's charity press—predominantly authored by men—covers often featured portraits of heroic men. Yet, as photographs and staff lists in the same periodical show, the work was carried out almost entirely by women. Women's roles within the various institutions depended both on the country's socio-cultural context and on the nature of the institution. The nuns, nurses, and caregivers depicted in the images belonged to an occupational stratum of women workers who exercised a degree of autonomy and authority in their practice. Although the

professionalisation of care generated internal conflicts among specialities, the male director—typically a physician—often overrode such rivalries, for example, between nurses (wearing traditional starched cloth nursing caps with ties) and nuns (wearing the distinctive Vincentian winged cornette). While many institutions relied on religious orders for care, by the early twentieth century, virtually all had been brought under secular oversight. Likewise, the distinction between spaces managed by religious women and those led by laywomen was often subtle, given that middle- and upper-class Latin American women were generally fervent Catholics and close allies of the Church. Within institutional hierarchies, women most commonly appeared as donors and only in certain instances as administrators. As mentioned in relation to the Women's Mental Asylum, the Argentine publication *Álbum histórico de la Sociedad de Beneficencia de la Capital 1823-1910* depicted women not only in most of the images but also occupying all the leadership roles across the institutions. Yet, when it came to management, spaces for boys and girls were distinctly gendered. Even the names of the establishments, *Asilo de Huérfanos* (Asylum for Orphans) versus *Casa de Huérfanas* (House for Orphans), carried significant differences (Figure 10). Although it was managed by women, the institution for boys was austere, severe and unadorned. All the teachers and wardens shown interacting with the boys were men. By contrast, the girls were dressed in a petite-bourgeois style, strolled through an institution whose name was embroidered in planting on a parterre. The boys stood in an empty, prison-like courtyard, dressed like workers. All other photographs of the Asylum emphasise that it was a space designed for the masses, easily managed, and entirely devoid of homemaking elements. This deliberate omission of homemaking represents a distinct kind of spatial agency, through which women reinforced gender differences.

The next two images (Figure 11) portray the Hospital de la Misericordia in Lima, a mental asylum that functioned in an old cloister and was popularly known as the *Loquería del Cervado*, with '*loquería*' being the equivalent of 'loony bin.' The image on the left corresponds to the male section, emphasising its austerity and prison-like appearance, with a fence preventing access to the garden. In contrast, the image on the right shows the female section: a large living room with a piano at the centre, bentwood rocking chairs, plants, a shiny tiled floor, and various other details that convey a completely different atmosphere. The institution was planning to relocate the male section to a new building, while renovations were underway in the women's section. The new hall for women displays refinement in its architecture, with moulding and stained-glass skylights. The space appears so ample that the objects placed within it seem insufficient. However, it is difficult to discern whether the characterisation of the hall was a result of female homemaking agency or a medical strategy.

As mentioned, in Peru, laywomen were not permitted to work in public charity, and critically, they could not hold directorial positions either unless they were nuns. The Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul were in charge of the asylum and most of these institutions. A Mother Superior managed the hospital alongside the doctor in charge (*Reglamento provisional del Hospicio de Insanos*, 1897). It is likely that the nun exercised considerable agency in administrative matters, owing to the moral authority attributed to her in matters related to women's welfare. Whether or not this was the case, the pair of images highlights two key points: a gendered differentiation in spatial (and potentially medical) terms, and, perhaps more significantly, a deliberate effort to enforce this distinction.

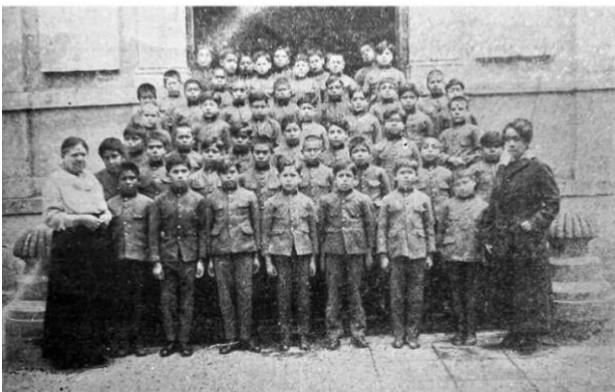
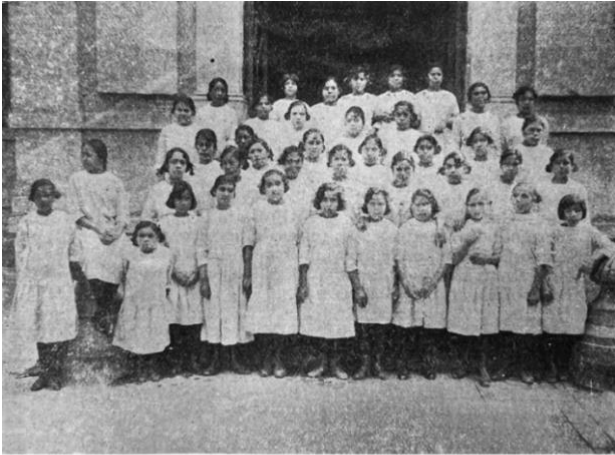
The next image depicts a parlour in the female section of the same institution, a room specially designed for inmates to receive visitors (Figure 12). The purpose of this room was not only to create a welcoming atmosphere for the patients but also to make a positive impression when their relatives—mothers, husbands, or even their children—came to visit. By closely examining the visible elements, it becomes clear that homemaking was a deliberate and thoughtful action. This agency extends from the architecture to the realm of objects: ornamental mouldings, wooden parquet flooring, and a series of rugs—perhaps handmade by the inmates—lined along the entrance path. Painted porcelain spittoons, various lighting fixtures, bentwood chairs with embroidered cushions, and doilies carefully placed on the backs of the chairs all contribute to the carefully crafted environment. Four round tables, each adorned with a tablecloth, hold ornamental figures, vases with artificial flowers, and a gramophone. Each of these objects serves a specific purpose, and collectively, their arrangement seems to be an effort to make this space of confinement resemble a domestic living room as closely as possible. Foucault's concept of discipline is softened and nuanced here, appearing almost as a postmodern attempt to blend discipline with care.

Many of the welfare activities carried out by women initially took place in domestic settings. This is evident in the early images of girls' secondary schools in Chile, which were founded and run by laywomen, often operating in domestic salos where small groups of girls gathered for lessons. Similarly, female social clubs dedicated to conversation, reading, debate, or political engagement began in women's living rooms. The home was also where women learned caregiving skills, and this domestic foundation is visible in nearly all early female public agencies, which entered the public sphere through various social initiatives without the mediation by larger institutions. Using Hannah Arendt's terminology, it can be said that women—before the professionalisation of care work, and especially those from upper classes—moved from the realm of labour to action, bypassing the intermediate

stage of work. In this way, women brought the household with them as both a form and a tradition of spatial production.

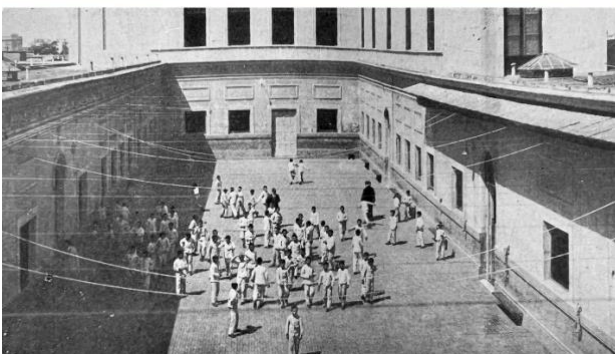
**Figure 9**

*Children's hospice (Hospicio de Niños), Ciudad de México, 1917*



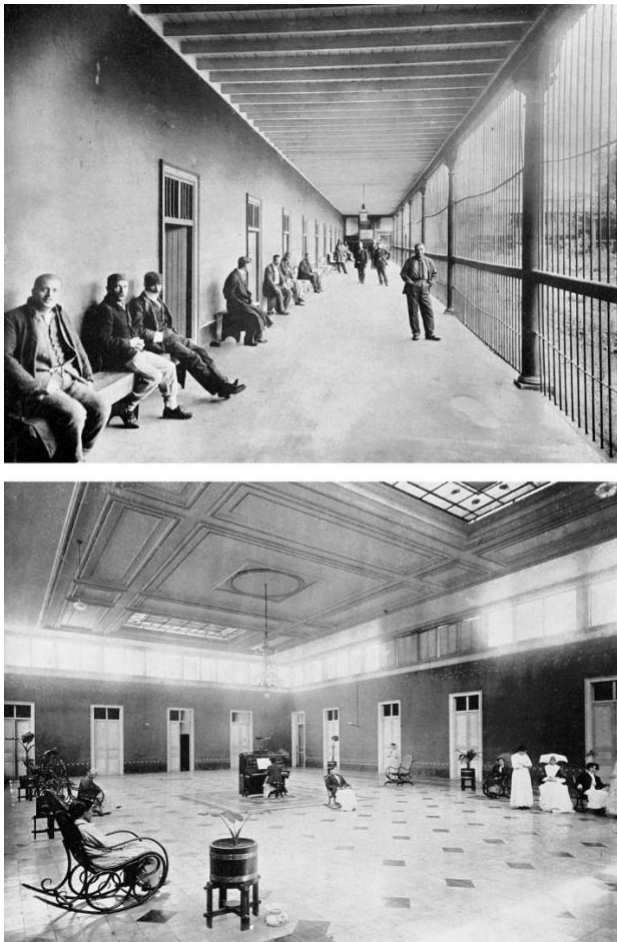
**Figure 10**

*Up: Orphan girls' house (Casa de Huérfanas). Down: orphan boys' asylum (Asilo de Huérfanos), Buenos Aires, c. 1910*



**Figure 11**

*Hospice of the insane (Hospicio de Insanos), Lima, 1913. Up: A corridor of the men's section. Down: Hall in women's section*



**Figure 12**

*Parlour at women's section, Hospice of the insane (Hospicio de Insanos), Lima, c. 1913*



## RECREATING AS PROGRAMMING JOY

Perhaps flowerpots and doilies may seem overly decorative or even trivial from a canonical architectural perspective; however, to me, they represent a fundamental, space-constituting action within architecture. This underscores a key point about the relationship between care architecture and women's spatial agency—an agency that might begin with something as small as a flowerpot but can grow into fully programmatic facilities, such as a ballroom or a parlour. Objects trigger acts, and in this sense, homemaking is not merely the staging of domesticity; it is a programmatic proposal for a more enabling, responsive architecture. Moreover, if architectural agency requires precincts and places to become visible and affirmed, women were undeniably involved in the

physical evolution of these institutions' buildings. Through photographs, one can trace how new functions and uses of space began to emerge—particularly those related to offering joy and well-being as integral dimensions of care. This deliberate programming of joy added layers of complexity to these institutions, moving them beyond their conception as purely functional or disciplinary environments.

Gardens are a type of space that began to appear suddenly and consistently across institutional buildings, especially hospitals. Their initial function was tied to hygiene: separating hospital facilities to prevent contagion through proper ventilation. Plants were long associated with air purification, so modern hospitals adopted pavilion-based layouts interspersed with gardens, as seen in the Women's Hospital Rivadavia ([Figure 5](#)). However, the inclusion of open green spaces—carefully gardened, irrigated, and equipped with paths and benches—offered a kind of well-being that extended beyond the hygienic rationale. These gardens were intended to be used by patients, and their significance becomes particularly striking in images where young girls are shown playing in a hospital garden in Argentina ([Figure 13](#)). The caption notes that they are convalescents: dressed in pyjamas, some wearing bandages. The girls vary in age, with some playing ring-a-ring-a-roses and others tending to dolls. The garden appears lush and shaded, with grass and blooming bushes. While the photograph may seem highly staged, it is telling that the garden is explicitly presented as a hospital facility, one being actively used by the patients. Gardening was also introduced as a therapeutic activity in mental institutions, as shown in the Hospital for Insane Women in Buenos Aires ([Figure 14](#)). This practice anticipates the concept of “healing gardens” as understood today, a concept promoted by Clare Cooper Marcus (Marcus & Barnes, 1999) and incorporated into contemporary hospital architecture since the 1990s. A similar sensibility appears in the design of the TC pavilion of the Women's Hospital in Buenos Aires ([Figure 15](#)), where a garden-like room was intentionally created, suggesting a continued evolution of this idea within architectural programs dedicated to care.

Beyond the large windows, with their potted plants and wicker chairs, the space resembles a domestic sunroom—an inviting area where patients might sit and read. In the previously mentioned Women's Mental Asylum of Buenos Aires, a more formal reading room was fully furnished for patients, featuring tall bookcases and study tables. Reading, understood as both a psychological stimulus and a source of spiritual nourishment, was central to patient life—just as the music from the gramophone was in the Peruvian parlour. This raises a question: could chapels and churches, often centrally placed in religious institutions, have served a similar role? And how did the nuns overseeing these institutions shape architecture to support prayer as a spatial practice? For many Latin American adults, religious belief was a profound source of relief; in this sense, it may also be considered a form of joy. There were also spaces designed for more prosaic pleasures. In the *Pensionados* section of Rivadavia Women's Hospital, a dedicated recreation room was outfitted with game tables, a small musical organ, and a collection of board games. Alongside less pleasant treatments—like electrotherapy—patients in the Women's Mental Asylum of Buenos Aires also engaged in therapeutic labour: basket weaving, broom making, sewing, even crushing bricks. Each of these activities gave rise to a new spatial function within the architectural program. For architects and planners, these additions introduced layers of complexity that extended far beyond the basic institutional layout. For nurses and caregivers, they demanded more work—escorting patients through gardens, settling them in divans to read or facilitating leisure time. Yet, this kind of programming—centred on joy, dignity, and well-being—was intentional. It was conceived as part of the broader practice of care, a laborious yet transformative agency in the architecture of healing.

Joy is perhaps most visibly associated with children's playgrounds. In the previously discussed Orphan Boys' Asylum in Buenos Aires, despite the absence of homemaking elements, a large open space was dedicated to outdoor activities. [Figure 16](#) captures a *recreo*—break time—filled with spontaneous, energetic movement. The sheer scale of the activity is striking. A tall wooden structure, supported by taut wires, allowed boys to swing; the long ropes likely offered the thrill of wide, soaring arcs. Two boys have managed to climb to the very top and now perch above, embodying a sense of freedom and risk. It is a wild, perhaps even dangerous scene—but the boys seem genuinely joyful. Notably, this space appears to be outside the direct supervision of women. At the centre of the image stands a man—presumably the warden—walking idly with his hands in his pockets, detached from the children's play. This contrasts starkly with a scene from the Infants' Hospice (*Hospicio de Lactantes*) in Lima, where more than twenty-five babies are gathered in the patio under the sky ([Figure 17](#)). Some are placed in wheeled cradles or baby walkers, others sit neatly in small chairs. The arrangement of bodies and movement seems carefully orchestrated, requiring infrastructure, foresight, and continual attention. Two nuns oversee this closely managed yet liberating scene, enabling the smallest and most unpredictable bodies to play and be joyful in a safe environment. Providing joy to children through recreation was no incidental act—it demanded strategy, space, furniture, and a remarkable degree of commitment, particularly in contexts of limited funding and resources. Though not solely the domain of women, it is often women who appear to have advocated most strongly for these recreational spaces. Across different countries, one finds charitable initiatives—such as the aforementioned charity by Electa Bastar—that collected toys and organised festivities for children, alongside

women's organisations advocating the creation of playgrounds. With respect to public play areas, perhaps the most notable case is that of Beulah Elfreth Kennard in Pittsburgh, whose efforts became a widely disseminated example in Chile through the activist Amanda Labarca (1914). These efforts turned joy into an architectural and logistical endeavour—one that required imagination, resolve, and a deep understanding of care.

Joy is almost palpable when imagining a day at the beach. Many health and care institutions were strategically placed by the sea, based on the long-standing belief in the therapeutic benefits of sea breezes. One such example is the Maritime Hospital and Asylum (*Hospital y Asilo Marítimo*) in Mar del Plata, Argentina, devoted to weak and convalescent children, especially those recovering from tuberculosis. These children had access to terraces and patios designed to maximise their exposure to nature, but more importantly, they were regularly taken to swim and play in the sand—a practice proudly displayed as a key part of the institution's mission (Figure 18). The beach, in effect, became an extension of the hospital itself.

A particularly ambitious institution of this kind was the *Puericultorio Pérez Aranibar* in Lima, Peru, placed directly on the coastline. Named after its philanthropist founder, this facility was conceived as a model institution for child welfare. 'Puericulture,' now an obsolete term, once referred to the science of enhancing child health and life expectancy—encompassing paediatrics, hygiene, and childcare practices. The *Puericultorio* was meticulously planned with these ideals in mind. Although the Sisters of Charity were in charge and many laywomen contributed as donors and workers, the women's roles have been largely erased from the official history of the institution. Nevertheless, their influence is evident. Children here also played on the beach, but the most distinctive architectural feature was the presence of open-air classrooms or verandas, taking full advantage of Lima's mild climate (Figure 19). These were called *Escuelas Climáticas*—'Climatical Schools'—imbuing the sea breeze with pedagogical significance. The facility also included a pool, not intended for competitive swimming, but as a joyful, recreational space for bathing and laughter. In the picture that portrays this scene (Figure 20), one can almost hear the children's gleeful voices rising from the water.

Figure 13

*Children's hospital San Luis Gonzaga, Buenos Aires, c. 1910*



Figure 14

*Hospital for insane women (Hospital Nacional de Alienadas), Buenos Aires, c. 1910*



**Figure 15**

*Winter garden at women's hospital Rivadavia, Buenos Aires, c. 1910*



**Figure 16**

*Orphan boys' asylum (Asilo de Huérfanos), Buenos Aires, c. 1910*



**Figure 17**

*Infants' hospice (Hospicio de Lactantes), Lima c.1913*



**Figure 18**

*Patients from the maritime hospital and asylum (Hospital y Asilo Marítimo) in Mar del Plata, c. 1910*



**Figure 19**

*Dining room of the climatical school (Escuela Climática) in the Puericulture Center Pérez Aranibar (Puericultorio Pérez Aranibar), Lima, c. 1930*



**Figure 20***Swimming pool in the Puericulture Center Pérez Aranibar (Puericultorio Pérez Aranibar), Lima, c. 1930*

## CONCLUSION

Women played a significant role in troubling and nuancing Foucault's concept of discipline within institutional architecture. Homemaking and programming acted as counter-architectural agencies, introducing subtle yet effective forms of resistance. Homemaking—through the placement of objects often feminised and dismissed as non-architectural—quietly redefined the disciplinary logic embedded in institutional spaces. These domestic elements, introduced by women and caregivers, were not merely decorative; they served as powerful interventions that reshaped the meaning and atmosphere of these environments. Simultaneously, programming joy—through the incorporation of leisure, play, and therapeutic routines—transformed institutional architecture beyond its functional core, creating spaces of well-being, spontaneity, and emotional care. The emergence of activities centred on joy and recovery necessitated new spatial typologies—gardens, parlours, reading rooms, and recreation areas—that expanded the architectural program beyond its original utilitarian limits. Together, homemaking and programming formed a deliberate strategy of domestication that challenged the rigid structures of discipline, introducing softer, more human-centred spatial experiences. This domestication blurred clear lines of control, complicating the institutional order and transforming disciplinary environments into more affective, layered, and enabling spaces.

Women, though often absent from official architectural and historiographic discourse, were key agents in spatial transformation—both through caregiving and through shaping the physical environment. Understanding architecture as a cultural production embedded within a complex societal ethos compels us to sharpen our methods and seek alternative ways of reading and interpreting space. I am particularly inspired by Hultsch and Pérez-Martínez's (2023) method of "reading with her," which involves engaging with layered systems of analysis to interpret architectural depictions. In this case, focusing on the layers of bodies and objects offers a compelling lens through which to uncover the spatial agency of women and reframe the architectural narrative.

The spaces reviewed here suggest that institutional architecture was never purely disciplinary. Through homemaking and programming, women and caregivers actively contested Foucault's model by embedding joy, relationality, and care within structures of control. At the same time, however, women also contributed to reinforcing stereotypes of gender and class, often imposing a serialised order shaped by their own—frequently conservative and bourgeois—values. Institutional environments for men and women, even under female leadership, remained distinctly gendered. In many cases, spaces for women and children incorporated elements of joy, beauty, and care, while those for men emphasised discipline, austerity, and functionality, reflecting and reinforcing broader societal gender norms. As Bissett (2022) points out, reformist practices of care can themselves be problematic, and exploring how these spaces were experienced and received by inmates would provide a more complete and nuanced understanding.

At the same time, it would be fallacious to suggest that the domestication of spaces and bodies was solely the work of women. While the significant presence of women in these institutions is well documented, many men were also actively involved. Introducing a gendered lens into the historiographical analysis allows us to identify the specific roles women played in these processes and recognise which spatial features may be attributed to their agency. This approach offers a different perspective on historical phenomena and deepens our understanding of both women's and architectural history. A spatial-gender scope also reveals how women's agency varied

significantly depending on the national context. For example, elite laywomen held greater power and influence in countries such as Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina, whereas in societies with more deeply rooted patriarchal traditions and revolutionary political processes—such as Peru and Mexico—laywomen were largely excluded from charitable work. In these contexts, nuns often exercised more authority, particularly in the absence of competition from upper-class laywomen, as seen in more liberal countries. In this sense, space becomes a key to understanding the social construction of gender and the emergence of incipient feminisms, each shaped by the distinct socio-political and cultural conditions of their respective localities.

Ultimately, this feminine agency in the production of space through the domestication of institutions provides a historical precedent for affective and therapeutic design, anticipating contemporary concerns with well-being and user-centred approaches in public architecture. While flowerpots and doilies may appear overly ornate or insignificant from a canonical architectural perspective, they represent meaningful, space-constituting gestures. What begins with a flowerpot can evolve into an entire programmatic facility—a playroom, a parlour, or a garden—shaping new spatial typologies. Homemaking and recreating are not merely about crafting domestic scenery; they are programmatic proposals for a more humane, responsive architecture that centres care, emotion, and the lived experience.

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No ethical approval was required for this research. The research is based exclusively on historical analysis of publicly accessible archival and published sources and did not involve human participants, interviews, interventions, or the collection of personal data.

### **Competing interests**

The author declares no competing interests.

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The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

### **Data availability**

This article draws on historical archival, visual, and published sources. No original dataset was produced. All sources consulted are identified in the references and notes, and are available through the relevant public archives, libraries, and published collections.

### **AI disclosure**

The author used ChatGPT solely for language assistance, including the identification of specific vocabulary, proofreading, and grammar checking, as the author is a native Spanish speaker.

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