

Editorial

Feminist Spatial Practices for Social Equality

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

Citation: D'Avolio, M. S., & Gerber, A. (2026). Feminist spatial practices for social equality. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(2), Article 15. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/19063>

Published: August 26, 2026

In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in the social and ethical implications of planning and designing the built environment from scholarly and practice-based perspectives. These reflections are led by an intersectional approach that considers questions of how patriarchal, capitalist and colonial systems affect participation in the construction of the world that everyone inhabits, and how the current system can be questioned and challenged.

Furthermore, there has been a growing interest in questioning the use of 'architecture' as a term that suggests the commodification of architecture by emphasising the connection between the profession and the built environment, and in looking for alternatives. The term 'spatial' has been considered an alternative as it includes the dynamic context of social space (Awan et al., 2011). Rendell (2011) introduces the concept of critical spatial practice to blur the binaries of theory/practice and private/public, an approach later developed under the umbrella term of feminist spatial practices. The intention of feminist practices to function as 'political acts that challenge the status quo and identified relationships of power' emphasises the purpose of disrupting binaries and hegemonic systems (Brown, 2011, p. 367).

A further aspect to consider about this approach is that spatial practice is a social practice, which is cultural rather than individual, therefore it develops 'patterns of action, which the individual participates in, and through which values are both performed and reaffirmed' (Petrescu & Trogal, 2017, p. 40). This highlights the importance of disrupting the reliance on individual and hegemonic performances, narratives, and expectations. A question raised in literature and discussed by some of the papers present in this special issue is whether this disruption can only be implemented from outside institutions, or if working within the institution can play a role in reforming the system from within. However, there is a shared agreement on the need to broaden the concept of 'practice'. Rather than understanding it as merely the design and production of buildings and urban spaces, it should also be considered in terms of reception, use, and occupation, as well as the analysis of users' embodied experiences and how it is described in writing and in other forms of representation and documentation (Rendell, 2011). There is an extensive body of scholarship by feminist thinkers, scholars, and activists that is essential to mention in relation to these discussions and topics. However, since this text is a short editorial, we have decided to keep references to a minimum. The articles included in this volume will introduce the solid foundation of literature that has allowed us, the guest editors, and the authors of the following papers to participate in the ongoing debate.

Our interest to include interdisciplinary contributions to this growing debate led us to develop this special issue, which found a special home in Feminist Encounters that, with its interdisciplinary focus and the interest on both historical and contemporary topics and praxis, was the perfect fit for this issue. This volume has a long genesis that started with a conference that we held at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW) in Winterthur (CH) in June 2024. The title of the conference was Women designing and planning for social equality - A political

and feminist reading of practitioners' commitment to rethink practice, question theory and take space. The aim of the one-day conference was to explore the ways in which women in spatial practices initiated or have been involved in rethinking practice, questioning theory, and taking space. As a result, their positionality as women and their political commitment guided their praxis towards fostering social participation and improving the everyday life of those usually inhabiting the margins of society. The intent was to focus mostly on the gender dimension of these reflections. However, while attending the conference and discussing the papers presented during the day, it became clear that these reflections were a good starting point for a wider conversation, more focused on the aims and the social commitment of the practices rather than on the gender dimension of who was implementing them. Therefore, the aim of the edited collection of contributions gathered in this issue is not to offer biographical accounts of women in the profession, to demonstrate their absence and its material implications, or to mention their participation merely because of their gender. Rather, the collection engages with the increasing interest in understanding how practitioners' positionality in society influenced their work. And as the main aim of these practices is to question the status quo of the discipline from a feminist, anticapitalist and decolonial perspective, the positionality explored is that of people usually inhabiting the margins of the spatial practices.

In this special issue we included papers that address reflections, discussions, examples, or other aspects that illustrate the social and political responsibility held by practitioners in the built environment. The following articles employ various theories, such as social reproduction and intersectionality, illustrate historical and contemporary examples, and propose innovative methodological frameworks. They explore various aspects analysed at different scales: domestic, local, and urban. Among many key concepts, contributions in the special issue question how practitioners engaged in spatial practices took/are taking a stance in confronting gender bias in the places of social reproduction, develop an interdisciplinary approach towards the concept of 'care' to illustrate its role in the praxis employed by practitioners in architecture and planning, consider the implications of being at the margins of history and the discourse of architectural practice, help questioning the concept of 'archive', and offer alternative readings of the past and the present where interpersonal relationships, in particular gendered ones, hold a fundamental role in the definition of design and planning disciplines.

We organised this issue into three main sections, namely critical analysis and activism, examples of historical case studies, and narrative as a method of analysis. However, the categories are not rigidly defined and overlap significantly.

PART 1 - CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND ACTIVISM

The first part of the issue takes a critical look at various aspects of feminist spatial practices. The four papers challenge assumptions behind what is considered 'good practice' and emphasise the need for a radical rethink of the meaning and potential of feminist spatial practice within a system that is still too deeply rooted in capitalist, patriarchal and colonial structures. The papers are aligned in their view that architecture is an ongoing, relational process with the capacity to influence power dynamics. As architecture is not neutral, its potential can be employed through practices of care to promote participation, inclusivity and cooperation.

Fatemeh Mahmoudnejad disputes the idea that co-design participation is inherently inclusive. The article is based on a study conducted in Scotland that aimed to demonstrate how the diverse backgrounds of participants can influence their access to, and therefore their inclusion in, the process. It advocates the development of transformative participation by acknowledging the relationship between diversity and the complex, relational power dynamics at work in participatory practices. The author's innovative approach lies in the suggestion that intersectional feminist perspectives can capture the relational and situational ways in which exclusion occurs in practice. Mahmoudnejad achieves this by applying an intersectional approach at three levels — intracategorical, anticategorical, and intercategorical — to explore relational complexities and identify participation gaps in underrepresented communities.

Cini Boeri's Domestic Project is a device that Carlotta Cossutta employs to exemplify the radical possibilities offered by feminist critiques of domesticity in rethinking spatial design. In her paper, which builds on the tradition of 1970s Italian feminism that conceptualised the home as a site of political conflict, Cossutta draws on the theoretical underpinnings of social reproduction to explore the relationship between domestic space and the formation of the family as a social institution. The paper aims to demonstrate the importance of spatial critique in redefining social norms, as the author herself explains: 'Boeri's proposal illuminated how domestic design encodes social norms of intimacy, gender, and labour, and how architecture can challenge them'. Even readers not usually familiar with architectural drawings would appreciate Boeri's innovative house plan, which is still visionary 40 years later.

Zuzana Tabackova and Lydia Greeakova reflect on the meaning of feminist spatial practices, aiming to expand the definition to include practitioners who do not necessarily identify their work as such, often because they are not familiar with the discourse. Through analysing the work of 21 organisations in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the authors argue that feminist spatial practice should be redefined as 'situated, interdisciplinary, multi-

scalar and oriented towards care and empowerment'. Furthermore, their reflections challenge the assumption in feminist discourse that alternative methodologies are essential to feminist spatial practice ('doing architecture otherwise'). Instead, they argue that the analysed practitioners manage to create 'good' spaces while also using mainstream methods. The site-specific analysis offers insights into a relatively unexplored post-socialist location, and the authors' familiarity with the context enables them to provide in-depth reflections and observations.

The following article adopts the same framework that views queer-feminist spatial practices as a form of action aimed at destabilising spatial order. This praxis can transcend the boundaries of the architectural profession and self-defined feminist collectives. In particular, Natalie Novik argues that commoning, through craft and maintenance, is an ongoing process that shares resources, knowledge, and spaces through mutual care and cooperation. This argument is exemplified by the case study of Not Quite, a collective of artists and craftspeople based in rural Sweden. The key concepts behind these practices are degrowth and maintenance. These are intended not only to move beyond the capitalist economic system, but also to promote a societal transformation based on care politics. The article also reflects methodologically on the use of practice as a mode of enquiry, and the author's familiarity with the collective under investigation enables the adoption of 'an embodied, situated way of thinking that produces understanding through doing'.

PART 2 - HISTORICAL CASE STUDIES

In recent decades, many different disciplines have reflected on the question: What can we learn from history if it has been written by men and the voices of women have been marginalised? The second part of the issue explores how history can be rewritten and revisited by examining overlooked sources, such as manuals and magazines, and how these sources can reshape dominant narratives. There are many examples of how women have established and designed new social spaces and introduced new spatial practices. The following papers illustrate some of these examples.

In her essay, Pía Montealegre approaches the history of institutional spaces in South America, through the medium of photography. Through these black-and-white, often blurred photographic documents depicting children and adults in institutions such as hospitals and orphanages, she identifies aspects that often escape historical analysis and written documents: the architectural agency of homemaking and the moments of joy it brings to these spaces of care. The photographs unveil homemaking and programming, activities which often escape historical depiction. They also reveal how these activities counteract Foucauldian spaces of power and control. Small domestic gestures can thus become subtle forms of architectural agency revealed only by photographs. Montealegre warns about how women not only introduced care and joy but also contributed to the reinforcement of gender and class stereotypes. These examples are not least noteworthy as they anticipate current reflections on spaces of well-being and care.

In the wake of industrialisation, a new social category emerged: single working women, for which new forms of living were needed, but they were not available. In the context of the emergence of this new class and the struggles it had to face, the difficulties it endured in its quest for emancipation and visibility, three different *Ledigenheime* in Germany, Switzerland, and England are presented by Jana von Wyl in her essay. These were tentative responses to the problem of 'surplus women' and attempts to find adequate architectural solutions. The three case studies illustrate different backgrounds, conditions, typologies, and architectures, as well as different attitudes toward women. However, they all share an attempt to overcome the existing gendered spatial division at the levels of cities and buildings and to emancipate women. Although the *Ledigenheim* typology and reformist impetus did not continue after the war, they stand as potential models that challenge dominant narratives. As such, they should be considered precursors of new forms of spatial organisation.

In the following article, Tara Bissett takes a close look at a specific medium — feminist manuals and catalogues — that were introduced in women's centres in North American cities as alternative forms of knowledge. Examining these manuals and catalogues raises the question of how they transferred knowledge and contested established epistemologies. Rather than being considered written sources, they are viewed as scores and notations that allowed for social transformation and could be repeated in different forms and times. This brings these manuals and catalogues closer to performance art, calling for a different perspective, which Bissett finds in Nelson's Goodman notion of allographic art. The result is a set of procedural forms that challenge the established conception of architectural production and labour. These manuals and catalogues enabled the circulation of knowledge within the women's centres, thereby creating new channels of knowledge outside of established structures. Classic forms of authorship are then questioned, and new collective forms of knowledge are established.

Henriette Steiner and Svava Riesto encourage readers to reconsider traditional perceptions of urban squatters in Copenhagen. They present a more nuanced narrative in which women play pivotal roles in both the squatting movement and the establishment. To lay out more in depth the roles and the possibilities of both sides and demonstrate the extent to which the squatters were not merely victims of the system they opposed, Steiner and Riesto refer to Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital. Through this concept, they argue that the squatters

were far from 'innocent' but rather actively sought to exploit their cultural capital for their cause. On the other side was Edel Saunte, a feminist politician who opposed the project from the city council's perspective. While both sides fought to improve living conditions, Saunte questioned living in condemned buildings as a form of social injustice, while the squatters saw it as a way to reinvent traditional forms of households. Thus, depending on one's perspective and the narrative that was developed around the issue, one side or the other was 'wrong', though both represent important positions toward social justice.

In the last paper, Alex Banister discusses the potential of women's magazines in interwar England to look beyond stereotypes and present multiple ways modern women could live. Looking specifically at the magazine *Good Housekeeping*, Banister demonstrates that it was more than just a magazine; it was a network. Alice Maud acted as Managing Director and enabled many women to become authors. Together, they promoted an alternative image of women and households to the dominant narrative. This enabled them to challenge norms and conventions and to promote alternative role models for their readers beyond stereotypes through the means of the home and its design. Specifically, it promoted new living arrangements for 'bachelor girls,' as professional single women were called, and suggested new forms of co-living. With an initial distribution of 150'000 copies, *Good Housekeeping's* influence cannot be underestimated. It is an invaluable lens through which to understand the transformation of women's status and changes in family dynamics between the wars.

PART 3 - NARRATIVE AS A METHOD

The third and final part of the special issue explores narrative as a method through which the researcher's subjectivity becomes an epistemic source. The papers in this section emphasise the significance of the body in methodology by situating the researcher's body and their interpersonal encounters within a context of relationality with the surrounding space. These approaches make the research method dynamic and situated within the context and the bodies, rather than static and universal. They also converse with the extensive, interdisciplinary corpus of work by feminist scholars who consider the body as a site of knowledge production. The following papers employ positionality and autoethnography through innovative approaches aimed at destabilising more traditional methods.

Through the employment of a compelling methodological approach, Elena Rieger connects her personal experiences with those of Emilie von Berlepsch, offering a critical reflection on the dual aspect of comfort/discomfort. By following the footsteps of the German writer on her travels in Scotland in 1800, the author questions the role of the architecture historian from a bodily perspective. Her richly descriptive anecdotes draw the reader into her sense of discomfort, a concept she seamlessly weaves onto the politics of space, granting it epistemic value. The connection between historical analysis and creative writing makes affective anecdotes a unique and personal methodological approach, capable of challenging the expectations of the 'disembodied researcher' and considering it instead a 'body-in-situation' (Young, 2005).

The objective of Fatma Mhmood's article is to expand the discourse on ecofeminism beyond the pitfalls of essentialism by employing an intersectional framework. By reflecting on women's gaze towards the landscape of the United Arab Emirates' nature from an insider perspective, the author proposes an approach able to problematise the traditional narrative by starting from women's experiences within urban and non-urban spaces. Nature, therefore, becomes experienced rather than seen. As experiences acknowledge positionality and diversity, this method allows to disrupt binary spatial categories. By situating her analysis within the paradigm of postcolonial Middle Eastern feminist studies and drawing from a substantial array of shared memories, Mhmood demonstrates that the relationship to the land transcends the visual and diverges from orientalist narratives.

The following article presents a fascinating 'intra-disciplinary' methodological proposal that combines and 'inhabits' both theoretical and practice-based approaches from dance and urban studies. Through their respective engagement with these disciplines, Adesola Akinleye and Elahe Karimnia develop a method of using dance to understand the experience of being present in the city. The method and language of the article are both original, offering a sense of constant movement and novel ways of experiencing the text - 'dance is to urban-journeying, as poetry is to text'. One of the aims of the proposed tentacular-feminine-body methodology is to reconsider the notion of city archives as static entities, instead suggesting their constant metamorphosis, which is derived from the dynamic, relational encounters that occur daily in urban space.

Xin Li proposes an extensive reading of feminist spatial practice theory developed by Chinese scholars, exemplifying the particularities of Chinese urban environments and emphasising the importance of developing a context-specific theoretical framework. The author develops the concept of carrying in terms of care politics, using it as both a conceptual lens and research framework through which to examine the relational dynamics between bodies, objects, and urban space. In her ethnographic account, Xin Li explores the material acts of carrying performed by gendered bodies in a residential neighbourhood in Beijing. She demonstrates how essential acts that foreground the four fundamental aspects of living - clothing, food, dwelling, and transport - sustain urban life. Drawing on critical urban theory, the author illustrates how the concept of carrying destabilises rigid dualities (e.g.

public/private, productive/reproductive) in order to support the idea that the body is a dynamic site of spatial production.

Building on the understanding established in previous papers in this section, which views the body as a source of knowledge, Uğur Sarışen's article queers autoethnography by incorporating 'accounts of non-linear and interruptive queer temporalities that unsettle normative chronologies'. The author's writing is crumbly, taking its form from ruins and allowing the reader to fill the gaps with their own positionality in relation to the text - it is refreshing to see that it is possible to find 'ways to exist within a normative system of academic production'. Although seemingly based on an ephemeral, fractured ontology of ruins, the article is firmly rooted in solid theoretical and methodological foundations. Through the use of autoethnography and autotheory, the author reflects on how space relates to justice by situating his queerness within ruins and questioning concepts such as knowledge, truth, and power.

BOOK REVIEW

The special issue also includes a review of the book *Reconfiguring Spatial Practices Through Dance: Collaborative Processes of Being-With in Dance, Architecture and Engineering* by Adesola Akinleye. Prof. Akinleye also contributed to this issue with an article proposing an interdisciplinary methodology for dance and urban planning. In his review, Jeremy Hahn offers a clear analysis of how the artist and scholar Adesola Akinleye develops a holistic framework as praxis, effectively commenting on the various means employed in the text's chapters - essays, poems, and interviews - through philosophical concepts and methodological reflections. Through a clever use of language, he enables dancing terminology to illustrate the innovative practices developed by Akinleye. Hahn pinpoints examples of how the author's methodological framework engages with philosophical themes to explain the intricate relationship between dance practice and the creation of the built environment.

CONCLUSION

While reading the articles that comprise this special issue, we realized that we were entering a communal space that goes beyond the singular written page. This is evident from the recurring key references, both from disciplines related to the built environment and from beyond - see for example Sara Ahmed, Iris Marion Young and Silvia Federici, all cited in many articles. This communal space is also evident in the use of theories that build up from one author to another, creating a solid foundation for this collective discussion. A shared ferment is perceived in the texts: an inner need to question uncritical and traditional methodologies, to reflect on the positionality of the researcher, to conceptualise embodiment within the built environment, to build communities through the employment of care politics, and to challenge dominant ways of writing history, reading sources and creating archives.

We were fortunate to have the opportunity to collaboratively create this issue with the authors, editors, and reviewers. We never took for granted the time and care they invested in this project. We are truly grateful and would like to thank you all very much. This issue positions itself within a longitudinal, interdisciplinary discussion of this topic that began before us and is already evolving. We would like to acknowledge and express our gratitude to all feminist thinkers, scholars, and activists who have enabled us to begin the conversation from this point.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank all the contributors, editors and reviewers for their time and care in working on this project. We would also like to thank *Feminist Encounters* for providing the opportunity to create this special issue and for their ongoing support.

Funding

The conference that motivated the authors to develop this special issue was part of the project 'Challenging or Reproducing the Status Quo? The Leftist Architect in Milanese Architecture, 196X–198X', which was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, Project Nr. 204692.

Ethical statement

No ethical approval was required for this editorial.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Author contributions

Both authors are responsible for all aspects of the development of this special issue, including the preparation of this editorial.

Data availability

N/A

AI disclosure

No generative artificial intelligence tools were used to prepare or write this manuscript. AI-based tools (DeepL) were only used to help ensure the text was grammatically correct during the revision process. The authors retain full responsibility for its content.

Biographical sketch

Maria Silvia D'Avolio is a postdoctoral researcher with interdisciplinary training and professional experience in architecture, sociology, and gender studies. She holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Sussex (UK). She has worked as a researcher at various international universities and had taught sociology, criminology and gender studies in the UK at the University of Sussex and the University of Brighton. Her research analyses intersecting inequalities from a feminist perspective, in the fields of architecture and the social sciences.

Andri Gerber is an architect and co-head of the Institute of Constructive Design at ZHAW in Winterthur. He holds a PhD (awarded with an ETH medal) and a habilitation (founded by an SNF Ambizione grant) from ETH. His recent interests revolve around the potential of analogue and digital games to address and convey architectural and urban subjects connected to sustainability. He is currently working on an SNF-founded project on the history of ecological architecture in Switzerland.

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Research paper

A Critical Feminist Perspective on Participation in Co-design for Planning Practice

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

Citation: Mahmoudnejad, F., Costa Santos, S., & Moyo, D. (2026). A critical feminist perspective on participation in do-design for planning practice. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(2), Article 16. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/19064>

Published: August 26, 2026

ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing prominence of participatory processes as mechanisms for the democratisation of decision-making, they perpetuate systemic power dynamics, inequalities, and exclusions. This article's critical feminist perspective on co-design processes as a mechanism for participatory planning practice offers new understanding of how different actors' intersectional positionalities influence their approaches to participation, across at three levels of intersectionality: intracategorical, anticategorical, and intercategorical. The study draws from 26 in-depth interviews with diverse participants in four case studies across Scotland. The findings show disparities persisting in the experience of participation, hinging on intersections of age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status despite narratives of co-design as an inclusive practice. Additional barriers encountered by women and individuals from underrepresented communities include implications of having a voice, different communication and reasoning styles, and methods of communication across differences. Through raising sensitivity awareness of subtle intersectional barriers, this article highlights the need for deliberate strategies to realise both the inclusion of diverse voices and acknowledging the diversity of intersectional positionalities embedded in participatory processes to enable transformative participation. This article advances a critical feminist perspective by revealing the ways in which co-design is challenged as a mechanism to promote inclusive planning practice.

Keywords: transformative participatory planning practice, co-design, critical feminist perspective, intersectional standpoints, underrepresented communities

This article applies a critical feminist perspective to interrogate co-design in participatory planning practice in Scotland and contributes by showing how different actors' intersectional positionalities shape their approaches to participation across three levels: *intracategorical*, *anticategorical* and *intercategorical* (see McCall, 2005). Cities have historically been designed and planned with a male perspective in mind and by men (Terraza et al., 2020). This has led to a systemic exclusion of women and other marginalised groups from urban planning and design process, meaning that their perspectives and experiences have rarely shaped spaces of everyday life (Beebeejaun, 2017; Kern, 2020; Andres & Natarajan, 2023; Lennon, 2023). This makes shaping spaces of everyday life a feminist issue (Elkin, 2017, cited in Bassam, 2023, p. 1), foregrounding the need to investigate how exclusion is enacted, even within participatory practices such as co-design. The critical feminist perspective and its

underpinnings, power relations of everyday life, intersectionality, and the lived experiences of different voices, offer a nuanced understanding of participation that goes beyond traditional technocratic approaches to decision-making (See Haraway, 1988; Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005; Wood, 2009). This perspective challenges the assumptions of neutrality and equity often associated with participatory planning and underscores the need to examine not only whose voices are amplified and whose are silenced but also the complex ways in which exclusion is experienced across different actors within participatory spaces. Notably, post-colonial and post-structuralist approaches—challenging racial hierarchies and prioritising the perspectives of marginalised communities—have already been highlighted (see Colomb & Raco, 2018), yet intersectional feminist perspectives remain underexplored, despite their potential to capture the relational, situational, and often inadvertent ways in which exclusion occurs in practice. Therefore, this article aims to interrogate the complexities of intersectionality within the context of participation in co-design in Scotland by asking: *How do different actors' intersectional positionalities shape their approaches to participation in co-design for planning practice?* In doing so, the article contributes by revealing complex, subtle ways in which power, privilege, and exclusion are reproduced in co-design and by demonstrating how intersectional positionalities influence having a voice, communication and reasoning styles, and methods of communication.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON PARTICIPATION AND CO-DESIGN

Deliberative and participatory planning processes—most notably *communicative planning* (Innes, 1995; Innes & Booher, 2004), *collaborative planning* (Healey, 2006), and *deliberative planning* (Forester, 1999)—are often positioned as mechanisms for democratising decision-making by bringing diverse voices into the shaping of places. Yet their inclusivity has long been criticised for overlooking the conflictual nature of human interactions, as consensus-oriented participatory processes often reproduce power imbalances whereby some actors have fewer resources and influence than others (Hillier, 1998; Fainstein, 2009). Participation does not always empower marginalised communities but can reinforce existing power relations, as the perspectives of dominant groups often become normative, *othering* less mainstream or less powerful social groups (Young, 1996, 2000; Hillier, 1997, 1998; Sandercock, 2000; Beebejaun, 2006, 2019). The key challenge, therefore, is not only who participates but also whose perspectives ultimately prevail in shaping a place (Massey, 1991). These dynamics reveal that power in participatory settings is not simply a binary division between the powerful and powerless; rather, it is complex and relational. Power relations within participatory settings shape who gets to speak, be heard, and influence decisions, and the ways in which local communities are asked about their contribution to the process since “certain groups may be hard to reach in some contexts and locations and not in others” (Gorjanicyn et al., 2008, p. 5). Young (2000) refers to this as *external exclusion*, when certain groups are absent from decision-making spaces in the first place, often reflecting broader structural inequalities. However, she notes that having the right and access to participation spaces does not ensure influence over the outcomes for everyone. But equally, those who experience discrimination in society face the same challenges in participatory planning and decision-making processes (Mansbridge 1983; Young, 2000), leading to *internal exclusion* (Young, 2000). These often more subtle forms of exclusion can manifest in multiple ways, for example, individuals with low confidence may find self-expression difficult; women and those for whom English is not a first language may struggle with dominant norms of communication (Lightbody, 2017). Participation must therefore be understood as embedded within broader political, economic, and social systems of privilege and discrimination (Young, 1990, 2000; Seydel & Huning, 2022). It is not a neutral process but one shaped by institutional logics and practices that reproduce capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial ideologies (see D’Avolio, 2021). These contradictions are mirrored in the structural exclusions and methodological limitations of planning, where structural inequalities remain entrenched despite efforts to include diverse voices (Sandercock, 1998, 2003; Beebejaun, 2006, 2019).

Historically, participatory practices have evolved from formal public hearings to more interactive co-design processes that aim to actively involve communities (Sandin, 2020). The focus of this article is co-design, a process that represents a collaborative, design-led approach to planning and placemaking. As such, co-design has gained traction in urban planning processes in recent years (Sendra, 2023), as a methodology for engaging with stakeholders including local communities who are affected by certain decisions in the process of making those decisions (Sanders & Stappers, 2008, 2012; Kelly, 2019; AlWaer & Cooper, 2020; Sendra, 2023). In Scotland, for example, East (2024) advocates co-designing places with girls rather than merely for them, to counter women’s historical underrepresentation in spatial planning. Co-design is often celebrated for foregrounding power imbalances and creating structures intended to empower communities (Sendra, 2023). Yet it continues to be shaped by the same shortcomings as earlier participatory methods. Much of the UK and Scotland’s participatory practice is still limited to consultation (CCQOL, 2024), often considered minimal participation rather than meaningful (Beveridge et al., 2016). As Escobar et al. (2014) argue, participatory processes risk becoming rhetorical unless terms such as *community engagement*, *collaboration*, and *participation* are redefined through new forms of experience, knowledge and legitimacy.

This argument resonates with broader critiques of planning systems in Scotland and the wider UK, which have historically been—and still are—shaped by white, middle-class male interests and have often aligned with the cultural norms and priorities of dominant populations, ultimately resulting in the exclusion or tokenization of minority voices (Lightbody & Escobar, 2021). Nevertheless, Matthews et al. (2012) caution against a reductionist approach to Scottish communities, echoing Beebeejaun's (2006, 2012, 2019) findings from English and UK contexts. Structural inequalities, whether rooted in geography, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, ability, or socioeconomic status, continue to shape whose perspectives are heard (Arnstein, 1969; Hillier, 1998; Forester, 1999; Healey, 2006; Atkinson & Marlier, 2010; Short, 2021). But inequalities are not only present but intertwined.

Crenshaw (1991) and McCall (2005) emphasise that social positions do not operate independently but intersect to produce unique lived experiences. Intersectionality asserts that to comprehend truly an individual's position and experience, one first needs to recognise that each social position relates to all other positionality markers within that individual. For example, engaging women in planning cannot be approached without recognising how age, employment, childcare, race, and faith intersect to shape their participation (Breitenbach, 2006). Colomb and Raco (2018) caution, however, highlighting that *difference* without considering power dynamics can mask inequalities, making all differences seem equal when some have a greater impact on social hierarchies. While emphasising diversity helps prevent broad generalisations about social positions like age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, it can also lead to fragmentation. This, in turn, may undermine the political and intellectual groundwork necessary to challenge the structural barriers that feminism has long fought against (Hendler, 2005), highlighting the need to understand intersectional positionalities involved in participatory planning and co-design.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative case study approach informed by a Critical Feminist perspective (Haraway, 1988; Crenshaw, 1991; Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019) to explore the role of different actors' intersectional positionalities on their participation in co-design processes as a mechanism for participatory planning practice. In doing so, it draws on McCall's (2005) and Windsong's (2018) intersectional studies of multiple, intersecting, and complex social relations. This complexity can be unpacked through the ways in which social categories are comprehended and analytically employed through critiquing rigid social categorisation (*anticategorical complexity*), emphasising diversity across multiple social groups or intersections (*intercategorical complexity*), concentrating on complexity of experience within a specific social group or intersection (*intracategorical complexity*), or an overlap of these three approaches (McCall, 2005; Windsong, 2018). Although researchers often apply an *intercategorical* approach focusing on differences and inequalities across intersections (Bauer et al., 2021), here we draw on both *intercategorical* and *intracategorical* complexities as appropriate. For instance, as Beebeejaun and Grimshaw (2010) argue, it is important to draw on commonalities between women, whilst acknowledging the different experiences of individual women and the depth of their heterogeneity. The data collection and analysis discussed in the following sections were carried out employing this critical lens.

Data collection

The article focuses on the observations, perceptions, and experiences of those involved in co-design practice as part of the broader doctoral research carried out at the University of Dundee by the lead author. Therefore this article focuses only on the qualitative data gathered through 26 in-depth semi-structured interviews carried out between January 2024 and August 2024 with diverse participants involved in four case studies across Scotland: Case Study 1 (2017, in-person without using online platforms, except using a website to communicate with local community on which part of the community survey was conducted), Case Study 2 (2018/2019, in-person workshops and widespread community survey), Case Study 3 (2020/2, in-person design workshops, online engagement was through the project website), and Case Study 4 (2022, hybrid blending in-person and online engagement methods such as online workshops using Zoom, online surveys, online summit). These projects were diverse in terms of location (they were selected within areas with multiple deprivations across Scotland¹), sociocultural and socioeconomic status of communities involved, and the subjects of visioning and planning (for example, they are part of regeneration or revitalisation projects, or developing a masterplan, not a single residential development plan). Access to the project reports and results, place, and people was key in the process of case selection. **Table 1** shows the selection criteria followed, in line with the maximum diversity approach (see Seawright & Gerring, 2008) to capture variations in geography, socioeconomic status, planning scale, actor roles, and modes and methods of engagement. Selected projects shared some commonalities but

¹ The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is a tool used to identify areas of Scotland that are experiencing high levels of deprivation across multiple domains, including income, employment, health, education, housing, and access to services: <https://www.gov.scot/collections/scottish-index-of-multiple-deprivation-2020/>

differed in others, making them suitable choices to contribute to the breadth and depth of understanding of actors' experiences in different contexts. This set the context for designing a purposive participant recruitment process within each case study. This further helped to contextualise their experiences in the data analysis process.

Table 1

Table one-case study selection criteria

Selection Criteria	Rationale	Case Study 1	Case Study 2	Case Study 3	Case Study 4
Time Period	Captures how time shapes participation practices	Pre-COVID-19 (2017)	Pre-COVID-19(2018/19)	Pre- and During COVID (2020)	Post-COVID (2022)
Participation type	Focuses on collaboration and co-creation	Collaborative/ Co-creation	Collaborative/ Co-creation	Collaborative/ Co-creation	Collaborative / Co-creation
Participation Modes	Explores digital divides and inclusivity through mode diversity	Interactive website, Face-to-face workshops + surveys	Face-to-face + (online) surveys	Interactive website and in-person	Online + in-person (Hybrid) (surveys, workshops)
Location (Geographic Access)	Ensures feasibility, equity of access for researcher and participants	Deprived urban area	Deprived urban neighbourhood	Deprived residential neighbourhood	Deprived rural area
Actors Involved	Multi-actor collaboration reflects power dynamics and knowledge plurality	Local community/groups, local authority, external experts	Regeneration forum, local community/groups, local authorities, external consultants	Local community/groups, local authorities, external consultants	Local authorities, local community/groups, external experts
Tools & Techniques	Diversity of tools reveals how facilitation either excludes or includes	drop-in sessions, in-person co-creation workshops, surveys, interactive website	Co-creation workshops, surveys, drop-in sessions	Co-creation workshops, art therapeutic workshops, drop-in sessions, interactive website	Online group discussions, surveys, in-person co-creation workshops
Breadth of Planning Topics	Unpacks how different planning themes shape inclusion/exclusion dynamics	Community vision, masterplan and action plan	Plan and visions for Regeneration	Planning a 20-minute neighbourhood	Action plan for the future of active travel
Access to Data & Reports	Ensures transparency, and ability to critically engage with formal outcomes of co-design	Available via digital archives	Accessed through Consultancy	Available via digital archives+ Consultancy	Available via digital archives
Suitability for Intersectional Analysis	Captures overlapping identities (gender, age, ethnicity, Socio-economic status) and differentiated positionalities	Moderately diverse participant base	Mix of age, socio-economic status, ethnic and gender diversity	Moderately diverse participant base	Mix of age, socio-economic status, ethnic and gender diversity

Source: Authors

Participants within each case study included community members, urban planners and architects as facilitators, and local authority officers. **Table 2** shows the participant composition who took part in the interviews. The interviews were offered online or in-person at the convenience of interviewees, and, in some cases, the opportunity to take part in a group discussion was offered for participants' convenience to keep the research process more inclusive.

Table 2*Table two-participant composition by the intersection of gender and age*

Case Study	Gender	Age	Community Member	Planner, Designer, Facilitator, Interpreter	Local Authority Officer
Case Study 1	Male	18-35	0	0	0
		36-55	0	1	0
		>56	3	0	1
	Female	36-55	0	1	0
		>56	1	0	0
Case Study 2	Male	18-35	0	0	0
		36-55	1	1	0
		>56	0	1	0
	Female	18-35	1	0	0
		36-55	0	0	0
		>56	2	0	0
Case Study 3	Male	18-35	0	0	0
		36-55	1	1	1
		>56	0	0	1
	Female	18-35	1	1	0
		36-55	0	0	0
Case Study 4	Male	18-35	1	1	0
		36-55	0	1	0
	Female	18-35	2	1	0
		36-55	0	0	1

Source: Authors

The semi-structured interview protocol allowed a natural flow of conversation so participants could freely share their insights on their experience of co-design and participatory practices, while follow-up questions enabled clarification and the probing of deeper perspectives. For this reason, the transcription was verbatim. By centring participants' narratives, the interviews sought insights on how participants' identities, experiences, and positionalities influenced their perceptions of participation in planning processes. This participant-centred approach prioritised the voices and perspectives of those involved—directly or indirectly—in co-design practices, making the research process more inclusive (see Haraway, 1988).

Qualitative case study analysis with an intersectional approach

Drawing on Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) and in line with this study's critical feminist epistemology, a reflexive thematic analysis was carried out in three steps using NVivo 12.6: *transcription and data familiarisation*, *feminist-informed initial coding*, and *development of themes*. The data analysis process was driven by four main considerations, to unpack the power of the data.

First, this study adopted a reflexive approach that acknowledged authors situated knowledge and their active role in interpreting data (Haraway, 1988). Rather than assuming themes *emerged* naturally, themes and patterns were actively *discovered* (Braun & Clarke, 2021), ensuring that the analysis did not treat participant groups as homogenous but instead explored how overlapping social positions (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status) shaped their experiences (Crenshaw, 1991).

Second, the analysis employed an abductive approach that integrated theoretical insights and empirical data in an iterative, non-linear process (Stake, 1995).

Third, the study engaged with both *semantic* and *latent* levels of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) through an intersectional lens to uncover the deeper meaning behind spoken and written content. This approach was adopted to achieve a more comprehensive analysis, as suggested by Abrams et al. (2020).

And fourth, the analysis presented here extends Yin's (2013) and Stake's (1995) within-case and cross-case analysis methods with intersectional analysis (McCall, 2005) to examine individual experiences and broader patterns of power and exclusion across sub-groups and therefore avoid overgeneralisation.

That said, reliance on retrospective interviews rather than direct observation, carried risks of memory bias, selective emphasis, and institutional contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). These limitations were mitigated by the reflexive nature of the analysis and triangulation (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Fusch et al., 2018) to cross-check sources and interrogate both shared experiences and points of divergence across diverse perspectives; the next section presents these findings.

INFLUENCE OF INTERSECTIONAL POSITIONALITIES ON PARTICIPATION

This article explores different qualities of participation across age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status to understand how different intersectional standpoints shape participation in co-design particularly in terms of access to means of communication and going beyond dominant norms of communication, and participation. In the following section, three main themes are discussed: *having a voice*, *different communication and reasoning style*, and *methods of communication across differences*. These themes were discovered organically from the analysis of qualitative data gathered in this study, rather than being predetermined. Also, as Beebeejaun (2006, p. 5) notes, they are not ‘real’ or fixed categories, but they are widely recognised and used by research participants across three levels of complexity: *intracategorical*, *anticategorical* and *intercategorical* (McCall, 2005; Windsong, 2018).

Firstly, at the *intracategorical* level of complexity, and despite the research being concerned with four social categories (age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status), the research is situated within highly deprived areas, thus limiting the diversity of socio-economic statuses between community members. Rather than analysing socioeconomic status as a separate analytical category, deprivation serves as the broader context within which these intersecting categories interact. This approach allows for a more focussed and nuanced understanding of how gender, in particular, influences participation alongside age and ethnicity, within communities shaped by socioeconomic disadvantage. This focussed approach makes sense in Scotland, where participation and co-designing future plans are significantly different in ‘extremely poor’ and ‘extremely wealth’ communities (Interview 1.1). As a facilitator (Interview 1.1) suggested, participatory processes including co-design ‘[have] been a success in wealthy communities that could afford consultants (...) but not in those stuck in survival mode’. This is because when people are in ‘survival mode’, thinking about their day to day lives, participating in co-designing their future may not be a priority; however, when they do participate their quality of engagement is far from that of the wealthier communities, thus providing a more nuanced understanding of their participation.

Findings show that communities who live in deprived areas, despite limited access to economic resources, show a sense of togetherness:

“To get together, to work together, to make something happen, then there is a (...) although this is damaged by lots of factors, there is a more natural instinct to approach solving problems, relationally, by getting together and figuring it out together.”
(Interview 1.1)

This is seen in opposition to a wealthier community that often ‘(...) expects to resolve problems by throwing money at it rather than solving them relationally through (...) time and giving (...) love to people’ (Interview 1.1); they also perceived to lack awareness of the needs of others without the same resources and connections which can lead to entitlement, unrealistic expectations in participatory working, and even poor behaviour towards each other and consultants, fostering a service mentality rather than true citizenship:

“Many people who are retired, (...) have energy and (...) skills, who are vibrant still to an extent, civic society within their particular location, they very rarely have a concept of how that isn’t the case for any other community, because people in a certain socioeconomic demographic only mix with the same people, birds of a feather and they can’t they can’t conceive of they’re being other people who are just don’t have access to those resources and networks connections. So, what that generates is a sense of privilege, which in terms of consultation often spills over into really quite sometimes quite bad behaviour towards each other and towards the consultants’ high expectations and in particular a kind of service mentality which is the opposite of sense of citizenship”. (Facilitator, Interview 1.1)

The discussion therefore acknowledges the different mindsets of participants from various socio-economic backgrounds as shown by the fact that, even when they mix, ‘in more mixed communities (...) lower socioeconomic groups would be quieter than middle or higher classes’ (Interview 1.2). Sanders (1997) similarly notes that across various racial and ethnic comparisons, higher socio-economic groups speak more, make more suggestions, and are rated as more influential in group discussions. In turn, this supports the notion that more affluent individuals and organisations tend to wield disproportionate influence over co-design processes, shaping planning outcomes in ways that reinforce existing spatial inequalities (Sendra, 2023). This article’s focus on communities from a more disadvantaged socio-economic status is justified by the fact that, as Jagtap (2022) reminds us, residents from lower-income communities often face compounded barriers.

Secondly, an *anticategorical* level of complexity within the findings reflects a rigid social categorisation of gender as a dichotomy between men and women. This is not due to a lack of inclusivity in our research design, as interview questions invited discussion on the experiences of individuals from diverse gender identities. However, participants consistently framed their responses within a binary perspective, discussing either their own

experiences or their perceptions of others in terms of men and women. This suggests that dominant societal narratives and lived experiences may still largely centre on this dichotomy, potentially influencing how participants conceptualise gender in relation to public participation. As Hendler (2005) highlights, there is an ongoing struggle in both feminism and planning: whether to prioritise specific social groups (such as women) or broader, more contextual categories based on diversity and difference. For example, Hendler (2005) points out a concern that contemporary emphases on diversity may inadvertently dilute the focus on women's issues which is ongoing and needs to be discussed.

Thirdly, the findings also show how the experience of participation is also complex at an *intercategorical* level, in such a way that the quantity and quality of participation are perceived and experienced differently at the intersection of gender and age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Participants expressed varying views on women's 'presency' (East 2024, p. 27) in co-design and design-led projects. A few participants, mostly men over 50, believed gender is not necessarily the dominant factor for inequality in co-design and other participatory practices they have been involved in: "the main division is not necessarily gender. It tends to be age...and socioeconomic level" (Interview 3.2, Facilitation Team Member). Others believed "(...) women aren't as represented generally within the events (...)" (Interview 7.1); this female facilitation team member attributed lower number of women joining participatory processes such as co-design to different responsibilities that women have in their everyday life: "(...) they have more responsibilities. They're trying to juggle lots of things". One female community member pointed out that this issue is especially challenging for minority ethnic women in their community, explained that their family responsibilities often make participation difficult: "ethnic groups, like parents, (...) particularly women, have so many responsibilities with families (...)" (Interview 2.2) which makes it difficult to get involved. This is consistent with Kern's (2020) argument that intensive parenting in urban everyday life disproportionately burdens women.

Throughout the following sections, the discussion of findings reveals that the quality of participation at the intersection of gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic context varies in terms of *having a voice*, *communication and reasoning style*, and *methods of communication* across different groups and individuals.

Having a voice

This study's findings show that, going beyond gaining access to co-design, the quality of participation across gender is significantly different, especially when intersects with other factors such as age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. And one key aspect that makes the quality of participation different is the participants' perception of *having a voice*. According to this study, older retired men were perceived as the loudest voices in group discussions such as design workshops. In contrast, women may find it harder to speak up in group discussions dominated by men—when more men are present at the table. As observed by a male facilitator (Interview 1.2), women are more likely to enter a co-design workshop, sit quietly throughout the whole event and then leave, whereas men are rarely observed to do so; or at the very least men tend to have a one-to-one conversation with facilitators before they leave the room if have not spoken during the process. In contrast, instances of this occurring with women are significantly less frequent, and if it does happen, it is usually older women who prefer to have a one-to-one conversation with facilitators before leaving the event. This resonates with Cornwall's (2003, p. 1338) warning about the 'add women and stir' approach, meaning that merely increasing descriptive representation of women in discussions does not increase their voice and influence in decision-making processes (Karpowitz et al., 2012).

Voice of minority ethnic woman

Minority Ethnic women might face further challenges in expressing their ideas and concerns because of cultural norms relevant to them. This, for instance, was found by the facilitation team engaged with Syrian refugees—referred to as the New Scots—in Case study 4:

"Women, when (...) in a group with a lot of men (...) they are (...) expected, it's considered sort of like respectful and proper behaviour for the women to be a bit quieter, maybe have a more reserved attitude at those times." (Interview 1.4, Facilitator)

As they observed that 'the women are more comfortable and are more likely to speak and give their opinions if it's an all-women's group rather than a mixed group' (Interview 1.4), they organised separate focus groups—break out rooms in online sessions—by gender with Syrian Muslim participants. In these separate groups, women were perceived as feeling more comfortable voicing opinions without men being present. This highlights the need to acknowledge the power effects of differences while providing an open and safe space for women to *have a voice* and use their agency, as highlighted by Cornwall (2003). This approach prevents the dominance of older male, business-oriented, and socially conservative sections of BAME communities in formal participatory processes, to the disadvantage of women and younger people as indicated by Beebeejaun (2006). Such perception

of compounded challenges Syrian women faced was also shared by a male interpreter from the same community who was employed to facilitate language and cultural barriers during the project:

"(...) that's a cultural thing (...) [when] there are a group of men and women, especially if a husband and wife and you collecting opinion from the husband-and-wife person. I'm talking about my culture, Syrian culture, so the wife in this case will say a little bit, will not say too much in front of her husband, especially if her opinion is opposite of her husband (...) that will make trouble for her (...) so she kept silent in front of her husband (...)." (Interview 3.4)

Karpowitz et al. (2012) attribute this type of behaviour in adulthood to how girls and boys are raised in different gendered cultures. Interestingly, the interviews with Syrian women showed that younger women in this community were less bound by perceived traditional notions of *proper behaviour* and felt comfortable sharing their opinions in the presence of men. This implies a potential shift in the mindset of the younger generation. Findings also show that women might feel more comfortable taking part in women-led settings, where they could freely express themselves. As a young female community member shared:

"I can understand...[what] put women off from engaging because I know myself sometimes. I'd (...) be (...) conscious (...) if I had, like an older guy and I was myself speaking to him, I never felt comfortable doing that [...and...] in some of the workshops... all the representatives from the Council were men. That annoyed me." (Interview 4.2)

These findings highlight the importance of diverse facilitation teams in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and language, which enables facilitators to build relationships across different social positions, influencing their participation. For example, a facilitator (Interview 1.2) emphasised their team's diversity as a strength that they would 'lean on'.

Voice of young people

Findings reveal a strong sense of agency and activism among the young people involved in this research, prompting a deeper reflection on the often-overlooked dimensions of young people's engagement. Although there was a general consensus among practitioners and community groups members about young people being harder to engage with, this study's findings revealed a hidden in plain sight aspect of young people's and children's participation in co-designing plans: dismissive attitudes towards young people, combined with cultural norms that prioritise adult expertise and lived experiences, often leading to young people feeling undervalued and unheard. As stated by a 12-year-old female volunteer at the time:

"A lot of the time, especially because of my age (...) a lot of people didn't always take me seriously (...) They wanted to speak to an adult (...) Some people thought it was amazing and were really engaged. I explained it to them, but I was kind of really dismissed a lot of the time, as if I was just here with my mum or I was just dragged here, or that I didn't actually want to be here. There was a lot of stigma around that for me. It was really hard to deal with in terms of people not acknowledging me as much as any other volunteer" (Interview 4.2).

This resonates with the study by Kelleher et al. (2014) which highlights that adults' unwillingness or inability to accept young people's agency in decision-making is a significant impediment to their participation. We also found that, while children's engagement is valued, there are underlying perceptions that their ideas need to be *managed* or filtered through a pragmatic lens to fit within the constraints of planning processes, as shown by this adult's views:

"Where you are with the children, it was much, much different because it was very aspirational (...) they wanted (...) big swings and Ferris wheels. That's fine, but that's the kind of discussion you have. So, and it wasn't about tempering that aspiration, I think it was really about making sure the young ones were engaged and fed into the process practically." (Interview 2.1, Local Authority Community Manager)

This shows a mismatch between children's voices and the practical considerations of adult actors, which tend to modulate those younger voices. This has led to young people frequently struggling to assert influence within decision-making structures dominated by older, more established actors (AlWaer & Cooper, 2020) despite youth engagement in participatory planning being increasingly championed (Campion, 2019). Nevertheless, this study found that young people's voices are not universally welcomed, and youth engagement may be received with ambiguity: whilst some older community members preferred separate co-design sessions for young people perceiving them as loud and disruptive, some facilitators emphasised the benefits of having different age groups together, enhancing 'creative listening' which facilitates 'a shared perspective and a shared solution' by helping the 'older members of the community think about the next generation and change (...)' (Interview 2.2)

This shows the need for proactively engaging with young people, especially young girls, when designing and planning cities (East, 2024). Nonetheless, the adult actors themselves are far from homogenous, highlighting different ways in which the final outcomes are influenced by the more powerful, even when everyone is nominally included (Young, 2000). The next section explores different ways in which women and minority perspectives can be undermined because their ways of communication do not conform with dominant norms in society.

Different communication and reasoning style

This study findings show that the lack of sensitivity to cultural expressions and different communication and reasoning styles, especially across gender and ethnicity, may lead to misunderstandings and disengagement among individuals and social groups.

Communication style across gender

A young female facilitator, reflecting on her experience in other participatory processes, described moments where she felt excluded because of the style of the discussion, where male voices dominated, talking over one another and making it difficult to focus on the purpose of the discussion:

"I think somebody had said to me, oh, you just need to speak (...) I don't think that works for me because I think they should be more like me (...) why should I be more like the men in the meeting? And I think they (...) should be respectful of everybody else (...) and try to be a helpful participant." (Interview 2.4)

This resonates with Sanders' (1997) and Young's (1996) arguments on how assertive, confrontational speech—often male speaking styles—is valued over exploratory or tentative expression, often silencing women and other less dominant voices. Indeed, we found facilitators perceived women's style of communication as more discussion-oriented whereas men were perceived as more assertive:

"Men can be a little bit more decisive about what the correct solution is for. I find women (...) wanting to have a discussion about it, whereas men will give you their opinion on what should be the right or correct response." (Interview 5.3, facilitation team member)

Communication style across ethnicity

The diversity of communication styles across different ethnicities adds to the complexity of this dynamic. For instance, according to a community interpreter (Interview 3.4), normal Arabic conversation is perceived as loud by the dominant cultural norm in society and might be misinterpreted as 'fighting' when they might be 'laughing and speaking normally'. This misperception could hinder efforts to build inclusive communication during the co-design process. These cultural misunderstandings may also extend to how questions are framed and phrased or even to the broader concept of engaging with local communities for planning purposes. For instance, some questions in Case Study 4 required rephrasing to be comprehensible within a different cultural context:

"Sometimes they ask the question, and I know in our culture or the people's culture, there is no answer. It's not understandable—you need to rephrase it to try to find the answer" (Interview 3.4, Community Interpreter).

This underscores the importance of not only linguistic translation but also cultural understanding between different ethnic—and cultural—groups. In this case, to provide a safe space for participation, two measures were considered: engaging a familiar person who had established a relationship of trust with the community, and a translator/interpreter from the same community to help with language barriers and cultural translations:

"One group was the new Scots with the translator (...) they were in a safe space that they were familiar with, and people [were] comfortable with." (Interview 7.4, Local Authority Officer)

This seemed to be a successful approach, as a female community member shared:

"(...) there is no problem. Because before we had some [language] classes with [Interviewee 1.4] (...) [so] it's easy for us [to speak]." (Interview 5.4)

On the other hand, in Case Study 3, a facilitation team member highlighted the limitations of the process without adequate interpreter support:

"I don't have the necessary language skills and my colleagues (...) if we had five or six interpreters, then we could have more valuable conversations." (Interview 3.3)

The points raised here challenge the efficacy of relying on established norms of communication and whether there is a need for rethinking or going beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to participation.

A tailored approach to participation was discovered in Case Study 4, where facilitators worked with the ethnic group in separate breakout rooms. While this approach enabled Syrian women to voice their ideas and concerns more freely, it also highlighted how gendered spaces can shape discussions differently. For instance, ethnic women's groups provided more solution-oriented responses, whereas the ethnic men's group in this case was used as a space for expressing frustrations without a strong focus on resolution or finding solutions. This highlights the need for "seeking to 'balance' representation between BAME men and women" emphasis by Beebejaun and Grimshaw (2010, p. 1999).

In addition, it was found that participation and communication across different categories also depend on the issue under discussion and the context in which co-design carried out. For example, an older woman shared

"I (...) feel comfortable (...) talking about things that I know, things that I do (...) and things that I understand, and I might not be comfortable with the discussions around something I don't know anything about" (Interview 6.2, Community Member);

Whereas male participants were perceived to be more confident in group discussions, even if they were not familiar with the topic under discussion.

These differences stem from diverse actor's modes of being and ways of thinking (Healey, 2006) and they require and reinforce unique, tailored methods of communication across intersectional positionalities.

Method of communication across differences

This study evidence that different methods of communication are perceived and experienced differently across gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. One of the most evident instances, which was accelerated during COVID 19 pandemic, was the increasing use of digital tools and platforms to engage and co-design with local communities. Planners and facilitators from public and private sector shared a belief that online platforms fall short of building high quality interaction and in-depth discussion among actors. A local authority officer shared,

"We had very poor discussions with our communities over the three years of the pandemic (...) we are now having to relearn some of the skills that we (...) had pre 2020 (...) to make sure that the quality of discussion (...) picks up again and over the next few years." (Interview 2.1)

Findings reveal that online participation methods may exclude individuals with low digital literacy, those lacking formal education, immigrant communities where English is not the primary language, people in remote rural areas with unreliable internet access, and older adults. Younger generations can play a key role in situation that require technological fluency such as digital co-design environments.

In using online interactive spaces, some non-verbal communication cues such as body language and expression are lost; this gets even more precarious when engaging with different ethnic groups (see Sisimayi et al., 2026). For example, an interpreter shared how important eye contact is in their culture:

"Eye contact is a school of (...) the speech." (Interpreter, Interview 3.4)

And found it difficult to grasp the tone of the conversation when Muslim women from their community preferred to turn off their cameras, rendering online communication into a barrier:

"Some of the lady they don't show their face, they turn the camera off (...) So we don't know if they if she speaks with anger or happiness or I don't know you can't see her." (Interview 3.4)

Although almost all participants shared a belief that face-to-face participation fosters richer, more relational exchange among actors, by providing a space for '(...) express[ing] your word or your emotions (...)' (Interview 6.3, community member), paying attention to cultural sensitivity or individual preferences seems to be key. For example, sharing an experience from a recent project, a facilitator stated that they would go to Mosque around Friday prayers to reach out to Muslim men who were taxi drivers, and they would reach out to, and have a chat with, their wives in school pickups. However, stating the cultural sensitivity of this reach out plan he said:

"We go, not me, but obviously female colleagues sometimes go to schools for young women and so you're dealing with gender, ethnicity and but you try to do it in a very sensitive way that feels inclusive." (Interview 3.2, Facilitation Team Member)

This supports Beebeejaun's (2012) argument that the failure of participatory frameworks to include ethnic minorities in planning stems from a lack of appropriate recognition of such minorities and the ways in which they would be engaged. As diverse community groups and individuals engage differently; for example, art workshops are increasingly used to promote active participation, mitigating some barriers, enabling participants to speak their mind instead of being quiet during roundtable discussions. However, a male local community member highlighted he was the only man in the art therapeutic session implying that it might not be the best practice for engaging with men: '(...) in the therapeutic art type workshop sessions I was the only man (...)' (Interview 2.3)

A similar pattern was observed by a facilitator that women were more likely to congregate together for mutual support and building relationships, making them more approachable and easier to connect with during co-design and participatory planning, whereas facilitators had to build a relationship before seeking men's input. For example, in Case Study 1, the way of building that connection was playing pool with men before inviting them to have a chat with the facilitator. As the facilitator stated:

"Key to that was [that] there was a sense of building relationship by doing something together over a table, which meant that we had formed a bond in that sense, which wasn't really required to connect with the women." (Interview 1.1)

This is consistent with the general view that labelling some groups such as ethnic minorities as difficult to engage with or hard-to-reach, reflects the challenges planners face in engaging them rather than a lack of willingness from these communities (Beebeejaun, 2006, 2012). While historical marginalisation and discrimination mean these groups deserve special attention, the real issue lies in how engagement efforts are structured, not in the communities themselves.

CONCLUSION

This article builds on a broader feminist discourse on participation and deliberation in planning and decision-making by showing how the intersection of social positions—namely age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status—shapes the experience of an individual's participation in co-design. In the multicultural context of planning, recognising the diversity of actors as *we* is a contested issue (Beebeejaun, 2012). To be black in a white community or working class in a predominantly middle-class neighbourhood, an immigrant in a xenophobic urban area, or a woman is not just a 'social category' but means 'to be on the wrong end of an asymmetric power relation' (Short 2021, p. 3). This research has addressed this issue by applying an intersectional approach at three levels—intracategorical, anticategorical and intercategorical—to unpack the complexities of participation in co-design and participatory planning processes in Scotland. The *intracategorical* complexity delved into the nuanced, shifting, and context-dependent experiences of individuals within specific socioeconomic status; the *anticategorical* complexity within the findings reflected a rigid social categorisation of gender as a dichotomy between men and women and the nuances of this historic dichotomy in participation in public life; and the *intercategorical* complexity reflected on the heterogeneity of social positions, thus pointing out the intersectional dynamics that shape individuals experiences and their participation in co-design for planning practice.

These research findings show that underlying power relations in society among gender and age groups impact their participation in terms of *having a voice, different communication and reasoning style, and methods of communication across differences*; and these dynamics are even more influential when intersecting with ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Men are more likely to speak up in co-design workshops than women, while women might feel less confident speaking up in a male dominated setting; women tend to learn more about the subject of the discussion before making decisions, while men seem to be more decisive about their opinions. However, other social positions such as age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status add to the complexity of one's approach to participation in co-design; for example, older women may feel more confident to share their ideas in group discussions. Older men are usually observed to have louder voices, those who tend to dominate participatory spaces, especially if being from a wealthy community, being retired and having more time and resources to participate, whereas for low-income communities, individuals may feel inferior or self-conscious about lacking the skills or educational background. In turn, they may think they do not have anything valuable to offer or they may have been let down by the institutional power in multiple ways in the past so that they think their contribution will not matter.

Although Scotland is getting more diverse, this diversity is not fully acknowledged when it comes to engaging with ethnic minority communities in Scotland. These communities are from diverse backgrounds, faiths, and cultures, thus there is a need to adopt different ways of communication that are not considered as the *norm* in Scotland. Being male or female in some ethnic groups with their own culture and faith, can add to the complexity of their participation. For example, in some cultures it is not common for women to speak up in the presence of their male relatives. Therefore, acknowledging differences should go beyond targeting the existing established community groups and networks, requiring in-depth research about the context of the community when planning for participation. Unpacking this complexity is the first step to understanding why some segments of society are continuously underrepresented. Further research is needed to delve into practical pathways to overcome these intersections.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank all participants who contributed to this study.

Funding

The authors received no funding for this research.

Ethical statement

This study was conducted in accordance with University of Dundee's ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the SDAD Ethics Committee [ref SREC-SDAD-23-RPG330]. All participants provided informed consent prior to their participation in the research.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Author contributions

FM: Research concept and design; collection and/or assembly of data; data analysis and interpretation; writing the article; critical revision of the article; final approval of the article. SCS: Critical revision of the article; final approval of the article. DM: Critical revision of the article; final approval of the article.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

AI disclosure

No artificial intelligence tools were used in the writing and data analysis of this manuscript.

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Research paper

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

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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.

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Research paper

Making ‘Good’ Spaces for the 99% – Feminist Spatial Practices in Slovakia and Czechia

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

Citation: Tabačková, Z., & Grešáková, L. (2026). Making ‘good’ spaces for the 99% – feminist spatial practices in Slovakia and Czechia. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(2), Article 18. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/19066>

Published: August 26, 2026

ABSTRACT

This article examines how spatial practitioners in Slovakia and Czechia offer valuable insights into making the field of feminist spatial practice more inclusive and accessible. Whereas feminist discourse in architecture and planning has become increasingly exclusive and Western-oriented, local spatial practitioners in Slovakia and Czechia engage in feminist spatial work through widely accessible, pragmatic tools. They often do this by strategically using the ‘master’s tools’ – mainstream methods and approaches – to create ‘good’ spaces for marginalised groups. By analysing the practices of 21 organisations, this research identifies five interrelated components of space – physical, educational, representational, participatory, and community-based – that collectively create ‘good’ spaces for marginalised groups. Thinking along these five components offers an analytical tool both for existing spaces and, more importantly, for practice, a guide for designing ‘good’ spaces. These practices offer an alternative to neoliberal, gendered, and racialised approaches to urban planning by prioritising care, empowerment, and self-efficacy over profit-driven development. The study shows that looking beyond dominant Western feminist discourse can provide valuable insights for a more accessible feminist spatial practice, one that is adaptable to different socio-political contexts and capable of influencing mainstream urban planning.

Keywords: feminist spatial practice, spatial justice, care, post-socialist, architecture

Most of the built environment fails to provide good space for the lives of many humans and more-than-humans, as it is continually designed for the privileged 1%. This is brought to the fore by many local and global protest movements (e.g. Extinction Rebellion; Deutsche Wohnen & Co enteignen) and is also evidenced by research on the exclusionary nature of neoliberal planning (Moulaert et al., 2005). Although neoliberal planning creates spaces for disadvantaged groups, like social housing, playgrounds, and national parks, these are often inadequate and are frequently structured in ways that limit the autonomy and agency of their occupants, thereby reinforcing the exclusions highlighted by activist struggles and critical urban research (Wacquant, 2008). Good spaces for the 99%, drawing on the discourse of spatial justice (Harvey, 2009; Soja, 2010), are those that empower, nurture, and build agency for all. The question of how to build such ‘good’ spaces continues to occupy socially aware architects and planners (Davidoff, 1965; Sandercock, 1998; Innes, 2010; Angotti, 2020). Among these debates, feminist spatial practice contributes a perspective that integrates feminist politics – closely tied to spatial justice – with concerns over how space is materially produced (Petrescu, 2007; Rendell et al., 2009;

Brown, 2011; Schalk et al., 2017; Frichot et al., 2018; Lange et al., 2021). Yet feminist spatial practice remains a niche within the socially aware architectural and planning circles addressing the exclusions produced by neoliberal planning. Drawing on literature and our own experiences, we frame this marginality through the following obstacles, which we consequently address in this paper: the persistent focus on gender, which narrows its scope, and the limited accessibility of its theory-laden methods.

The still prevalent understanding of feminism as a primarily gendered cause, in architecture understood narrowly as creating spaces for women or promoting women's work, rather than as a matter of value-oriented politics, arguably discourages many people of all genders from engaging with feminist spatial practice. Yet feminist discourse has already expanded beyond gender issues, while recognising that these remain an important, unresolved dimension, to also encompass broader questions of equity and justice (Arruzza et al., 2019). This paper, like our previous work (Grešáková, 2025; Tabačková, 2022), contributes to such an expanded understanding to demonstrate its relevance to all those striving for spatial justice. Additionally, the paper aims to address another, less explored, yet frequently named issue: the difficult accessibility of feminist spatial methods to architects and planners who are not familiar with the feminist discourse. To clarify: the belief that architecture must break away from 'the master's tools' (Lange et al., 2021) – a term borrowed from Lorde (1984) – has led to new spatial methods, often embedded in specific situations and theory-laden terminologies (see, e.g., Frichot, 2016). This intentional distancing from mainstream architecture and planning methods makes their adaptation back into mainstream practice challenging, a difficulty that is seen sometimes as an obstacle to be overcome, while other times as a necessary boundary to preserve the radical force of feminist spatial practice (Frichot, 2016; Petrescu, 2007; Schalk et al., 2017). In this text, we focus on the former, while remaining cautious of the latter.

The paper investigates spatial practices in Slovakia and Czechia, where the discourse of feminist spatial practice, or socially engaged architecture more generally, is largely absent, as visible in the lack of contributions from this region in the literature outlined above. Yet, as we show, there are practitioners who engage in spatial justice work aligned with feminist principles. Drawing on our long-term involvement in the field as members of the non-profit studio Spolka, we analyse the practices of 21 organisations working with people without shelter, urban bikers, abandoned historical buildings, or pollinators. We argue here and elsewhere (Grešáková, 2025; Tabačková, 2022) that their work constitutes feminist spatial practice, understood as situated, interdisciplinary, multi-scalar, and oriented towards care and empowerment, without them necessarily subscribing to global feminist theoretical frameworks. Examining these practices, which operate outside the discourse of feminist spatial practice yet embody its values, provides a fresh perspective on how feminist spatial practice can create 'good' spaces in more accessible ways. Our analysis reveals important lessons. These practitioners succeed in creating 'good' spaces while using 'the master's tools' – widely accessible, often mainstream methods associated with neoliberal planning. They do this rather than relying on newly invented feminist tools, which enables them to collaborate with a wide range of actors familiar with mainstream methods in a context where specialised expertise is scarce. Moreover, by considering organisations' overall practices rather than isolated projects, we show that the 'good' spaces they create combine multiple spatial components – physical, representational, pedagogical, participatory, and communal. Building on feminist spatial theory outlined in the first part of the paper, we offer a framework that structures these components, clarifying their interrelations and making this practice more legible and transferable. In doing so, we contribute both an analytical and a practical tool aimed at expanding the accessibility of feminist spatial practice and bridging the gap between theory and everyday spatial justice work.

FEMINIST SPATIAL PRACTICE AS A DISCOURSE

Feminist spatial practice aims to transform urban environments to be more inclusive and equitable by challenging the patriarchal structures embedded in architecture and urban planning. In other terms, they aim to create 'good' spaces for the 99%. In this section, we outline how the literature, written largely by the practitioners themselves, presents this undertaking. Rooted in feminist theory, feminist spatial practice originates in a critique of how urban space has historically been shaped for the needs of a privileged minority, while marginalising women and others (Weisman, 1992; Coleman et al., 1996). The legacy of Le Corbusier's 'Modulor Man' – an able-bodied, economically secure male, exemplifies how spatial design has prioritised the needs and values of some over others. In conversation with the evolving broader feminist discourse, feminist spatial practices continuously expand the notion of who these 'others' are, shifting from focusing on white middle-class women to addressing the diverse needs of the 99% (Arruzza et al., 2019). The 'good' spaces they create range from more traditional architectural typologies like housing, schools, and community centres to cooperative housing initiatives, experimental educational summer schools, and community memorial projects (Feminist Spatial Practices, 2023). What makes these spaces 'good' is not only their physical design but the values underpinning their creation, including intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Angeles, 2023), situatedness (Haraway, 1988), and care

ethics (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; de la Bellacasa, 2017; Fitz & Krasny, 2019). Feminist spatial practices can thus be understood as an entanglement of politics and design praxis, each informing and challenging the other in a continuous, iterative process.

Emerging from everyday realities, specific struggles, and lived experiences of intersecting oppressions, while connected to the broader struggles for justice, feminist spatial practices are always situated, as well as entangled with wider conversations about social transformations, care, and the making of space. The embeddedness in the local and the particular means that feminist spatial practices are best understood through case studies – stories of resistance, care, and transformation in specific contexts. The situatedness of each case is also what makes it difficult to translate practices across contexts and arguably impedes their accessibility. Nevertheless, as discussed below, a shared objective to create ‘good’ spaces and certain common spatial strategies can be traced. These case studies, often autobiographical, form the core of feminist spatial discourse, which tends to be documented in compendia rather than single-author monographs (Petrescu, 2007; Rendell et al., 2009; Schalk et al., 2017; Frichot et al., 2018). In describing these practices, authors frequently draw on feminist theorists from outside architecture and planning – thinkers like bell hooks, Sara Ahmed, Donna Haraway, María Puig de la Bellacasa, and Kimberlé Crenshaw – whose work provides the conceptual tools to interrogate power, care, and positionality and connects the individual cases to the larger feminist discourse and political struggle. While these theories offer a valuable critical lens through which projects can be both evaluated and generated, many of these case studies remain inaccessible to practitioners outside of academic and institutional contexts due to an increasingly theoretical and specialised language (Rendell, 2006; Petrescu, 2007; Frichot, 2016; Schalk et al., 2017; Frichot, 2019). In the following, we zoom in on the technicalities of creating these ‘good’ spaces through feminist spatial practices, outlining the processes and the expanded understanding of space they necessitate – one equally framed in complex theoretical language and thus difficult to grasp for those outside the discourse.

Values and methods of feminist spatial practice

To understand how feminist spatial practices make ‘good’ spaces, it is necessary to first clarify what makes a space ‘good’ for the 99%. While this depends on the specific communities involved, there are shared characteristics. ‘Good’ life and ‘good’ spaces are in feminist discourse often articulated in contrast and resistance to what is currently available to marginalised groups – spaces shaped by market-driven extractivism privileging the interests of the so-called 1% (Ahmed, 2017; Arruzza et al., 2019). In opposition to this, ‘good’ spaces are those that support community, foster care without paternalism, empower communities, and nurture collective agency (Petrescu & Trogal, 2017). These spaces respond to the evolving needs of those who inhabit them, allowing communities not just to survive but to thrive. Feminist spatial discourse is, in this regard, intertwined with the concept of spatial justice, as developed by thinkers like Edward Soja (2010), Henri Lefebvre (1996), and David Harvey (2009), who have all critiqued the unequal distribution of power, resources, and access within urban environments. Feminist scholars expand this foundation by introducing intersectionality to emphasise how these inequalities are further shaped by gender, race, class, and other intersecting forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality, a key feminist framework, shows how different systems of domination reinforce spatial exclusion in complex ways. Moreover, feminist spatial practitioners challenge the anthropocentric assumptions of urban design and planning, advancing a notion of spatial justice that recognises more-than-human actors – ecosystems, other animals, and natural processes – as vital participants in the co-creation of space and as equally deserving of ‘good’ spaces (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2016). Through these theories, feminist discourse also expands its own narrow focus from the needs of white middle-class women to those of the 99%.

In the creation of ‘good’ spaces, feminist spatial practitioners often reject the conventional tools and methods of architecture and planning, such as standardised design typologies and user models, glossy renderings, or profit-driven processes. Drawing on Lorde’s (1984, p. 112) assertion that ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’, these tools are understood not as neutral but as instruments that maintain the very systems of oppression – neoliberalism, sexism, racism – that architecture, as a discipline, has historically served. As explored in ‘The Social (Re) Production of Architecture and Architecture and Feminisms’ (Petrescu & Trogal, 2017), power imbalances are not just present in space but are produced and reproduced through design methods. This parallels Haraway’s insistence that ‘it matters what matters we use to think other matters with’ (2016, p. 12), or, here, to design with. Feminist spatial practitioners instead seek to practise and to do architecture ‘otherwise’ (Awan et al., 2011; Petrescu, 2007; Schalk et al., 2017). To signal a break from institutional authority and to affirm that space-making is not the exclusive domain of credentialed professionals, the term *spatial practice* is preferred over architecture – particularly capital-A Architecture. It invites broader participation, expands who is recognised as an expert, and thus also empowers marginalised communities to shape their own environments.

Zooming in further onto the concrete feminist spatial methods, there is a resonance with the above-highlighted attentiveness to specific contexts and diverse needs, as well as scepticism of the spatial methods

associated with the canon of Architecture and planning. They are therefore typically situated, multi-scalar, and interdisciplinary and often draw on artistic or performative practices. The inventiveness of spatial methods is legible in the literature. Here are a few documented in the volume *Feminist Futures of Spatial Practice*: 'silent protest, sharing-counteracting-connecting, commoning, navigating through intersectionality, carnivalesque intervention, re-doing heritage, urban caring, and instructing conversation' (Schalk et al., 2017, p. 15). Such experimentation, although highly relevant for the creation of 'good' spaces, inevitably makes many feminist methods difficult to translate into the routines of mainstream practice.

Yet despite this complexity and situatedness, a closer look at these specialised, situated methods reveals recurring strategies: participation (Awan et al., 2011; Petrescu & Trogal, 2017), pedagogical practices (Schalk et al., 2017), community- and commons-building (Petrescu, 2007), material practices of maintenance and repair (Frichot et al., 2018), artistic and performative interventions (Rendell, 2006; Frichot, 2016), speculative design (Frichot, 2016; Frichot et al., 2018), advocacy work (Kern, 2020), and visibility work (Ahmed, 2012; D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020). Importantly, these strategies are not exclusive to feminist spatial practice: mainstream architecture and planning mobilise them as well, sometimes to create 'good' spaces, but also to reinforce neoliberal or exclusionary agendas (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Ahmed, 2012; Tronto, 2013). With these parallels, we aim to highlight the already existing translations and co-options of feminist methods into the routines of mainstream practice, while also underlining that it is the values, rather than specialised methods, that ultimately shape the creation of 'good' spaces.

Furthermore, there are also examples of more accessible methodologies that embody feminist values but do not have the feminist tag. The book *Critical Care* (Fitz & Krasny, 2019) demonstrates this by presenting architectural projects that may appear 'normal' in typological terms but are reframed by accompanying theoretical essays to highlight how feminist values of care, interdependence, and responsibility towards the planet underpin them. In doing so, the publication makes visible how deployment of feminist values can enable the production of 'good' spaces even through existing architectural tools – a strategy also employed by the practitioners in Slovakia and Czechia, as we will see later.

As feminist spatial practices intervene not only in the built form but also in relationships, narratives, and everyday practices, they require an expanded understanding of space. Feminist spatial discourse consistently challenges the idea of space as a neutral backdrop or empty container, instead describing it as relational, dynamic, and always in the making. Doreen Massey (2005), often cited in the discourse, captures this by defining space as the product of interrelations and as a sphere of multiplicity that is never fixed but always under construction. Scholars drawing on assemblage theory (Frichot & Loo, 2013; Frichot et al., 2016; Jobst & Frichot, 2021) have furthermore emphasised how spaces come together through heterogeneous elements – people, materials, stories, ecologies – that form temporary constellations rather than stable wholes. Posthumanist feminist thinkers such as Bennett (2010) extend this argument by highlighting that materials and more-than-human actors are not passive but active participants in shaping environments. Taken together, these perspectives point to a conception of space as an assemblage of material and social relations always in becoming, resonating with Haraway's concept of 'worlding' (2016). Such an understanding of space enables the feminist spatial practitioners to build worlds not only materially but also through narrations, enactment, and perception. The theoretical concepts of space outlined above are foundational to this understanding of space. However, many practitioners employ it intuitively by questioning the established paradigms, without necessarily naming or engaging with these theories (Frichot, 2019; Rendell, 2006). As a few scholars note, this highly theorised and complex understanding of space can present a challenge for practitioners outside the discourse, who often perceive space primarily in physical terms (Petrescu, 2007; Schalk et al., 2017). This paper takes up this challenge: drawing on both literature and our own fieldwork, we propose a framework of an expanded understanding of space that makes the concept more operational for those within as well as outside of the discourse.

FIELD DESCRIPTION AND METHOD OF ENQUIRY

Slovakia and Czechia grapple with similar neoliberal developments as the countries in the West: privatisation, commercial development, and the weakening of public housing shape cities in ways that often disregard social equity (Hirt, 2012; Chelcea & Druţă, 2016; Ferencuhová & Gentile, 2016). Although actors countering these processes exist, they are not coherently described in the literature. Lokšová's thesis (2023) highlights the significant role of NGOs in initiating participatory approaches and safeguarding public interests in planning, especially during and after the transition to the market economy, a reality confirmed by our study. Feminist discourse equally only began to take shape in the 1990s (Cviková & Juránová, 2009), although the role of women in society and in architecture was also a topic during state socialism (Ryndová et al., 2003; Lišková, 2018; Bucur & Daskalova, 2020; Brühová & Huber-Doudová, 2024). Feminist spatial practices aligned with Western discourse appeared only recently, with a new generation, including us, the authors of this paper. The practice is

strongly understood as architecture and planning for women, although there is a shift towards values. There are two initiatives, both platforms, that are in the mainstream linked to this field: Women Public Space Prague (WPS) (2015–2020) and Architektky (2020–today). Their differences illustrate the shift well. Whereas WPS primarily focused on promoting women in the profession and is no longer active, Architektky addresses broader issues, such as the precarity of students in architectural employment, expanding beyond women's issues. This shift aligns with the wider field of feminist spatial practice discussed above. A significant milestone was the 2023 exhibition *Liberated Space: Care – Architecture – Feminism* (2023) in Bratislava, which presented a historical overview of the two countries alongside works by contemporary practitioners. To highlight the cultural enmeshment of the two countries, it is worth mentioning that the exhibition was curated by a Czech artist, the group Architektky is run by Czech architects, but WPS Prague was founded by a Slovak architect. The installation by Architektky at the mentioned exhibition provides valuable insight into feminist spatial practices, featuring responses from members of the Facebook group Architektky to what feminist architecture is. These responses highlight values like inclusivity, empathy, care, community, and equity, which extend beyond gender issues, despite being articulated solely by women. With our research presented in this paper, alongside our curatorial project, the exhibition *Beyond Architecture: Czech and Slovak Spatial Practices for the 99%* (2025) in Prague – which builds directly on this research – we aim to further shift and establish the discourse of feminist spatial practice in the two countries.

Leaning on the principles and attitudes of feminist spatial practice, we used the snowball method and sought out organisations that create 'good' spaces for marginalised groups in Slovakia and Czechia. As the objective of the research was to be a mobilising force, we focused on currently active organisations with established practices. To move beyond the identity politics of feminist spatial practice, we concentrated on organisations and their activities rather than on personal approaches of individuals, which tend to be more difficult to learn from, as they are tied to unique biographies and specific standpoints. Furthermore, examining the overall practice of organisations allows us to observe patterns, shifts, and, most importantly, the consolidation of certain approaches and methods in creating spaces for marginalised groups. By considering the whole practice of organisations, we were furthermore able to see connections between individual projects and how they interact as a whole in the creation of 'good' spaces. Such studies are largely absent in accounts of feminist spatial practices, and our contribution highlights their value.

Starting with our own contacts and acknowledging our position in the field, we gathered over 250 organisations that our informants identified as creating spaces for marginalised perspectives. We intentionally used the term 'perspectives' rather than people, community, or groups to encourage broader thinking, including more-than-human marginalised groups. From this pool, we selected 21 organisations using additional criteria, like geographical diversity, for a more detailed analysis, which involved conducting interviews with a representative from each organisation and reviewing relevant documents. Analysing these organisations together does not allow for an in-depth understanding of each but enables us to see trends and patterns. The selection aimed to represent a broad range of practices. The following categories emerged from the data. The selected organisations cover a case from each category. Detailing of these categories serves here also as an overview of the field:

1. Who the organisations are creating space for: The clients – diverse marginalised groups identified in our data – fall into five intersecting categories:
 - People in housing need: This includes individuals, families, women, and young people leaving children's homes, often from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, many of them Roma.
 - People moving on bikes or on foot: While biking infrastructure often prioritises able-bodied individuals, safe pedestrian pathways are crucial for children, women, and people with limited physical abilities.
 - Public space for the 99%: This refers to the interplay between physical spaces and the diverse groups who use them, emphasising the inclusion of marginalised voices in the planning and accessibility of public spaces.
 - Post-industrial and post-coal landscapes: This includes people, other animals, soil, economies, stories, buildings, and heritage – elements that shape landscapes exhausted by extraction and left to their own means.
 - More-than-human actors: These include pollinators such as bees, buildings with complex histories, forests, and rivers – elements rarely considered when envisioning the built environment.
2. What spatial practices they engage in: All selected organisations create physical spaces, ranging in scale from small objects to entire streets and city-wide cycling infrastructures. They rely on architectural and planning expertise, either by including professionals from these disciplines within their teams or through long-term collaborations. Besides architectural studios, all other organisations have diverse disciplines in their teams. All

organisations rely on a broad spectrum of knowledges, ranging from environmental studies, sociology, and communication studies to social work, education, and arts.

3. What the format of the organisations is: The majority are NGOs, some functioning as non-profit architectural studios. The selection includes informal and formal groups, for-profit studios, activist movements, institutions such as galleries, and groups linked to universities. Many can be categorised as activist or informal NIMBY (Not in My Backyard) groups.
4. Where they are active: Most organisations operate in capital cities, where many are also based, even if they engage in projects in peripheral regions. However, some organisations work in small towns and villages.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with representatives of each organisation during the COVID summer of 2021, mostly in person, allowing us to visit the spaces where they operate. This access enabled us to review materials on site, and we often left with physical documents, such as publications about their work. Our interviews explored their practices, motivations, and links with formal planning structures. Only at the end did we ask whether they identified their practice as feminist.

As embedded researchers in the field, we drew not only on formal interview data but also on informal, relationally produced knowledge, sometimes referred to as 'gossip'. In feminist research, such knowledge is recognised as a legitimate methodological strategy, enabling situated, context-sensitive, and reflexive interpretation (Haraway, 1988). This approach allowed us to attend to gaps or silences in the data. For instance, one organisation's interview did not provide much evidence of feminist spatial practice, yet we knew that another member (who was not interviewed) is engaged in such practices and might have responded differently. Our immersion in the field allowed us to critically reflect on our findings.

The interviews were transcribed and coded in Atlas.ti software, and the data was updated through document analysis in 2024. We reviewed materials collected during interviews, as well as public content from organisations' websites and social media for data triangulation. On this basis, we created short descriptions of each organisation for the *Beyond Architecture* (2025) exhibition. All descriptions were shared with the organisations for adjustment, which could thus see how they were positioned alongside others. As we received only minor corrections, this served as another valuable way to validate our interpretations of their spatial practice.

To identify patterns in spatial practices, we employed an iterative approach, reading, coding, and redefining categories through multiple cycles of analysis. This led to five components of space emerging from the data, shaped by the feminist spatial theory outlined above. Although informed by theory, these components arose directly from the data, aligning with feminist methodologies that emphasise complexity and situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988). These components, described below, allow an analytical look at the diverse spatial practices of creating 'good' spaces, which makes it easier to entangle the complex situated practices originating in unique standpoints and make them accessible to others as well as adaptable to other contexts.

MAKING 'GOOD' SPACES IN SLOVAKIA AND CZECHIA

The analysis section does two things simultaneously. Its central aim is to examine how spatial practitioners in Slovakia and Czechia are creating 'good' spaces. Through this analysis, we aim to uncover more concrete methods and spatial strategies that build on the theoretical discussion above in order to make the practice of creating 'good' spaces more accessible – especially to those outside of explicitly feminist discourse. At the same time, this section explores the connections between the feminist spatial practices described in the theory section and the work of practitioners in Slovakia and Czechia who do not explicitly identify as feminist spatial practitioners, but whose intentions and values closely align with that discourse. By drawing out these parallels and differences, we hope to bridge the two, strengthening the connection between theory and practice, which lies at the heart of feminist spatial practice.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify why most of the selected practitioners can be described as feminist spatial practitioners, although the majority of interviewees do not label their organisations or themselves as feminist (Grešáková, 2025). They all create spaces for marginalised groups, as outlined above, and state in interviews that their practices are grounded in values such as care, empowerment, solidarity, social justice, equity, and cooperation, clearly resonating with the principles found in the feminist spatial practice discourse outlined above. Through their participation in the *Beyond Architecture* (2025) exhibition, which situated their work within this discourse, some of the organisations have also begun to recognise their practice in this framework, although the categorisation as 'feminist' originates from our analytical perspective.

Spaces for the 99%

Considering the spaces these organisations create, it becomes evident in the reception of their clients, which are diverse marginalised groups, that each of them contributes to the making of at least some 'good' spaces. For instance, the client base of DOM.ov (dom = house, domov = home), an organisation working with

disadvantaged Roma families in Eastern Slovakia, continues to grow with each completed housing project. The environmental NGO Arnika is regularly approached by residents in Prague when their neighbourhoods are threatened by urban development, signalling trust in and recognition of the organisation's advocacy work. AutoMat's Critical Mass rides consistently attract participants, showing that their efforts to reclaim public space resonate with the broader community. Some organisations also collect data that indicates their impact on the everyday lives of people they support. For example, DOM.ov reports that their clients, after completing their programme and having their own home, are more likely to keep employment and that children of their clients are more likely to remain in school – clear signs of increased stability and empowerment. The bookings for Čierne Diery's accommodation project in a restored historical mansion in the overlooked region of Gemer demonstrate a renewed public interest and local vitality in the region. These examples suggest that the spaces these organisations create are supporting the 'good' life of marginalised communities. They create spaces that foster belonging, care, and agency, enabling communities not just to survive but to thrive, making them recognisable as 'good' spaces in accordance with feminist spatial justice (Petrescu & Trogal, 2017).

These 'good' spaces are also situated – a further central aspect in the discourse – shaped by both the needs of marginalised groups and the specificities of the planning and legal context. This is evident in the evolution of the practices of the organisations described in more detail elsewhere (Tabačková, 2022). Some organisations began by experimenting with approaches imported from the West, like participatory practices that rely on municipal support, later adjusting them based on what works locally. Others developed organically from the ground up, shaped by the realities they encountered along the way. By tracing the longer-term trajectories of these organisations rather than analysing isolated case studies, we can see how their spatial strategies mature over time through trial, reflection, and ongoing dialogue with the communities they work with, as well as available knowledge and skills. Their practices shift and develop over time as they remain focused on what matters – the creation of spaces that empower and care for those excluded from the benefits of urban development. Some of these spaces are more similar than others. For instance, cycling advocacy in Prague and Bratislava shows many similarities, not only because both are capital cities with comparable urban forms and challenges, but also because the organisations in both cities learn from and collaborate with one another. In contrast, housing initiatives for Roma communities in a suburban housing estate in Czechia and rural Eastern Slovakia diverge significantly, shaped by differing settlement structures, histories, and legal frameworks. Through this situated, iterative approach, practitioners refine their own understanding of what a 'good' space can and should be in each context and how they could be created given the local situations.

Working with 'master's tools'

An initial view of the spatial methods these organisations employ reveals a surprising finding. Most of them make frequent use of the 'master's tools', such as social media, catalogue family houses, and tourist accommodations. Only a few organisations – mostly those led by architects versed in feminist and critical discourses – consciously experiment with new tools or aim to develop alternative methods in the spirit of 'doing architecture otherwise', such as performative mappings, discursive dinners, and listening sessions. While experimental and artistic methods require expert knowledge, mainstream tools allow wider participation of local practitioners who are generally knowledgeable of these tools. This makes it easier to create 'good' spaces, especially in contexts with limited availability of specialised experts. Using known tools also arguably makes the practices more accessible to their clients.

Take the example of DOM.ov, which assists families in building catalogue family houses on the edges of villages – spaces that feminist spatial theory has often critiqued for reinforcing patriarchal domestic roles and isolating women. But in this context, the same typology takes on a different meaning. The dominant approach of municipalities in Slovakia in providing housing for these communities is to demolish makeshift homes that are deemed hazardous and replace them with municipal rental housing, typically in the form of single-storey buildings or low-rise blocks. This strategy has repeatedly failed: over time, housing is neglected by both residents and municipalities, deteriorates, and is ultimately demolished again, serving to reinforce harmful stereotypes that these communities are incapable of sustaining a 'good' life. Rather than improving the situation, such interventions often reinforce marginalisation. In this context, DOM.ov's catalogue family houses on one's own plot of land represent stability, dignity, and the fulfilment of a long-held dream thought unachievable for members of this community. It becomes a tool for empowerment, a spatial form that enables a different future and supports the 'good' life of DOM.ov's clients, as outlined above. However, the house itself is not what constitutes the 'good' space alone.

Employing the spatial lens of feminist spatial theory outlined above, we can bring together other components of DOM.ov's practice to understand the 'good' spaces they create. The organisation's practice involves not just building houses but also a year-long education programme in home economics, a savings-based microloan system, regular visits from social workers, adjustments to land-use plans, support from neighbours and extended

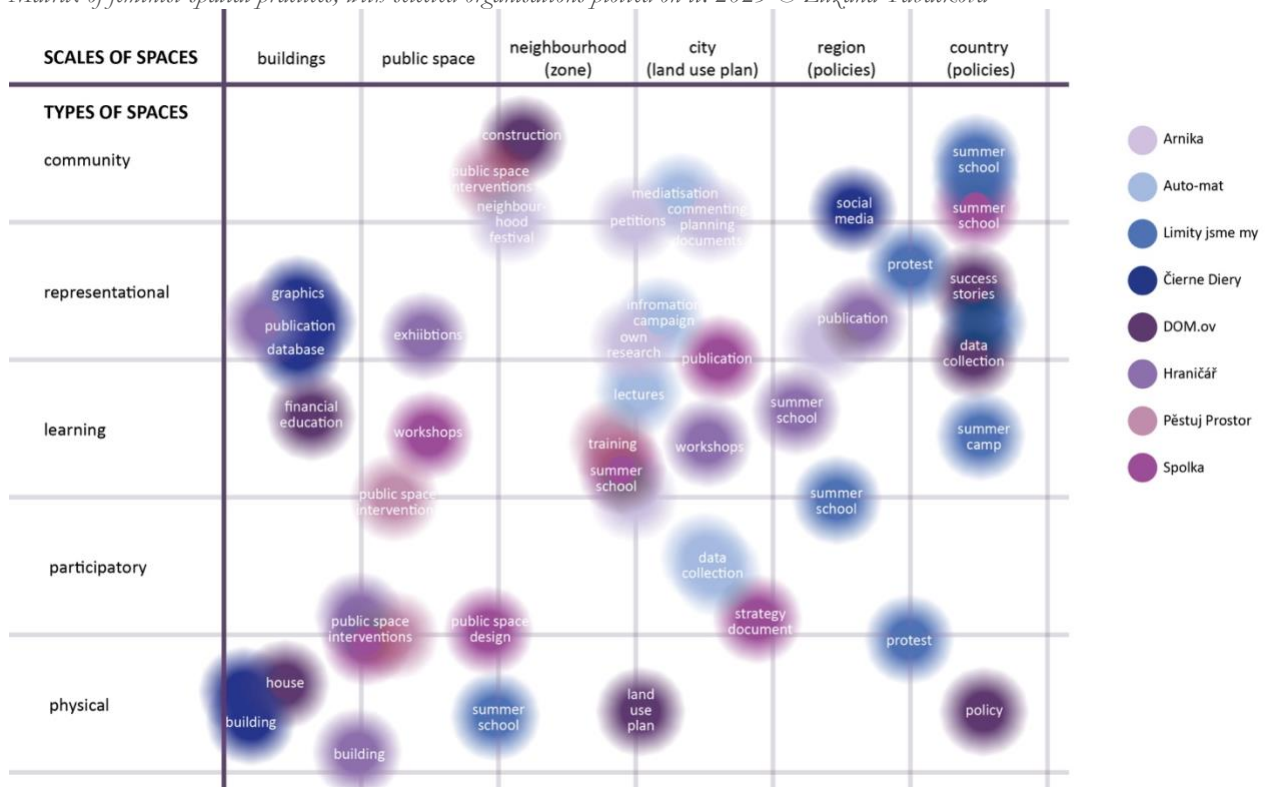
family during construction, national-level policy work, and social media storytelling that shares the success of participants. Each of these spatial practices addresses a different, interdependent aspect of the exclusion of this community from access to 'good' homes. It is all the individual spaces created through these practices that together amount to the 'good' space for this community. Such practice can be described in feminist terms as intersectional, as it addresses multiple issues of exclusion and caring by building the community's agency through a dynamic assemblage of physical, social, emotional, and institutional elements. All organisations we studied employ a similar intersection of diverse spatial practices/spaces to create 'good' spaces. It appears that this variety of intersecting spaces, rather than innovative spatial tools, is what enables the creation of 'good' spaces. In the following section, we present a framework of these spaces, tying them back to the feminist discourse outlined above.

FIVE INTERSECTING COMPONENTS OF SPACE

Our iterative analysis of the spatial practices of 21 organisations led to the emergence of five recurring, intersecting spatial components: physical, pedagogical, representational, participatory, and communal. When considered alongside the multi-scalarity of these spaces – from individual homes to broader policy environments – these components form a matrix with two intersecting axes, as shown in [Figure 1](#). Some practices appear in multiple areas of the matrix, reflecting their multifaceted nature, such as those that combine education with community-building efforts. Just as space and practice are deeply entangled, so are these spatial components. What follows is a detailed description of each component, supported by examples from our data. These examples show the variety of spatial tools and methods in use, as well as how each type of space is linked to others. Each category is also contextualised through relevant feminist spatial theories, highlighting how the strategies employed by organisations in Slovakia and Czechia resonate with feminist spatial discourse. Altogether, this framework offers a grounded understanding of what 'good' spaces consist of and how their components are necessarily interrelated and span multiple scales.

Figure 1

Matrix of feminist spatial practices, with selected organisations plotted on it. 2025 © Zuzana Tabačková



Representational spaces are created through photos, graphics, texts, databases, studies, and other forms of media. Representational spaces give visibility and legitimacy to marginalised groups and the worlds they inhabit, particularly when physical transformation is not yet possible due to a lack of resources. For example, Čierne Diery's graphics of abandoned historical buildings reframe these structures from neglected remnants to objects of desire, creating a shift in public perception. They, like many other organisations, also create databases of buildings that have been marginalised, for instance due to their links with an uncomfortable past – socialist,

Hungarian, or other. These databases act as both a record of and an invitation for care and attention. Similarly, DOM.ov uses social media to publish success stories about Roma families who have built their own homes, challenging dominant narratives of dysfunction and dependence. AutoMat collects and visualises cycling data in Prague, making visible what is already happening on the streets and using that data to lobby for safer infrastructures. As feminist theorists like bell hooks (1998) and D'Ignazio and Klein (2020) have pointed out, such representational work is a vital site for creating 'good' spaces. These are not merely support tools; they are where new imaginaries and worlds begin to take shape. Data, stories, and visual materials become interventions in themselves – tools for counter-narratives and for assembling new social-spatial realities, resonating with Haraway's notion of 'worldings' (2016). When physical transformation is constrained by structural inequalities, representational space becomes a crucial starting point. As the case studies show, representation can shift perspectives, reframe what matters, and prepare the ground for other forms of spatial intervention.

Pedagogical spaces empower individuals and communities through knowledge-sharing and capacity-building. One kind of these spaces operates on a 'help to self-help' model to foster long-term agency. Arnika, for example, offers pro-bono legal consultations to help communities resist exploitative urban developments, while Pěstuj Prostor runs open calls that provide both funding and architectural support to locals to improve public spaces they care for. Such initiatives often overlap with participatory and physical spaces. DOM.ov integrates a year-long financial literacy programme as part of its self-build housing model, ensuring that new homes are sustained by stable household management. These are pedagogical spaces that align with the emphasis of feminist spatial practices on education as empowerment (Petrescu, 2007; Schalk et al., 2017). They are also sites where situated knowledge (Haraway, 2016) – knowledge grounded in lived experience – is produced and shared. Other kinds of learning spaces are more traditional, focusing on spatial practitioners, those aligning with feminist values or not, like municipal workers, university students, and architects in practice. Summer schools, seminars, university courses, conferences, lectures, and qualification courses are all formats widely used to transform the mainstream practice and also to build communities of practitioners that can support each other in the creation of 'good' spaces.

Participatory spaces follow a broad spectrum, from informing residents of urban plans, consultation processes, participatory workshops, and co-design sessions to hands-on construction of public infrastructure – much like Western processes influenced by Arnstein's (1969) *Ladder of Citizen Participation*. These spaces are often intertwined with physical, pedagogical, and communal spaces; they are moments for relationship-building and collective knowledge production. They take the form of neighbourhood festivals, community dinners, or formal processes done in collaboration with municipalities. More than the form, it is the intention to redistribute power that makes them feminist (Petrescu, 2007; Arruzza et al., 2019; Angeles, 2023). These spaces allow for the recognition of multiple standpoints and lived realities, engaging communities not merely as stakeholders but as co-creators. Participatory processes can also be transformative: by engaging directly in shaping their environments, people often shift their understanding of themselves and of what is possible. These are spaces of becoming (Grosz, 2001), where individuals and collectives strengthen their agency and build confidence, voice, and a sense of ownership over the built environment.

Physical spaces are the built, material components of spatial practice, ranging from permanent housing to temporary interventions. They include DOM.ov's self-built homes, Čierne Diery's architectural renovations, and other organisations' festivals, summer schools, or street closures that temporarily alter the everyday experience of space. These physical spaces are often used tactically as a means of prefiguring alternative futures: a car-free street becomes a playground, a square becomes a commons, a ruin becomes a sought-after object. The climate camp of Limity Jsme My is both a physical and a relational prefigurative space – a temporary world built on principles of solidarity, non-hierarchy, and care for humans and more-than-humans – an act of feminist 'worlding' (Haraway, 2016). Very few examples involve the creation of entirely new physical spaces, which is likely connected to the resource-heavy nature of construction and especially the lack of financial means. Instead, much of the work focuses on the maintenance of and care for existing spaces (de la Bellacasa, 2017; Fitz & Krasny, 2019). For instance, Čierne Diery's tourist accommodation creates a new architectural object while preserving the layered interior of a historical building – not rewriting but maintaining and caring for it. Materiality plays an important role here. The insect house, by another of the researched cases, COLridor, for example, uses the natural properties of wood to expand and contract with humidity. Spolka, to cite another example, uses concrete gutters, originally designed to divert water from landscapes, and reimagines them as furniture in a new water retention garden. These practices work with what is already there, foregrounding care and reuse, as do feminist spatial theorists who centre maintenance, relationality, and ecological entanglements in design (Fitz & Krasny, 2019). We also include in this category the design of physical space through tools such as urban strategies or land-use plans, which, although abstract, ultimately shape material space and how it is experienced.

Communal spaces are created through the relationships that sustain and emerge from spatial practice. Čierne Diery's social media presence is a key example: it cultivates a network of (not only online) supporters who give cultural and symbolic value to the buildings they promote. Pěstuj Prostor's work depends on the strength of local communities to initiate and sustain public space projects. The peer-learning environments shared by practitioners themselves – workshops, networks, and informal collaborations – form a community of practice. They are vital for the maintenance of 'good' spaces over time, ensuring that interventions do not remain isolated events but become embedded in everyday life (Petrescu & Trogal, 2017).

A final insight that emerged during the analysis is the inherently complex and relational nature of many spatial practices. When attempting to map singular practices onto the matrix, it became clear that many of them produce more than one type of space simultaneously. This is why some practices appear in multiple places within the matrix. The simultaneous creation of multiple types of spaces often happens intuitively, especially for organisations working with limited resources. It's a practical and effective approach: one spatial method frequently gives rise to several types of space at once. Take, for example, a neighbourhood festival. While it may appear to be a simple, temporary physical intervention, it often generates multiple spaces. It creates a physical space where people gather, but it also reshapes how the space is understood and experienced. If the event includes an exhibition showcasing data on cycling patterns or stories from overlooked communities, it simultaneously becomes a representational space. A workshop or public discussion during the event turns it into a pedagogical space. If residents are involved in shaping the programme, sharing food, or voicing concerns, the event also becomes a participatory space. Add informal moments of connection – conversation, music, shared meals – and a communal space begins to form. All of this can happen within the span of an afternoon, through a single practice. However, not every event will create all five components, nor should it. The data shows that it is the overall spatial practice, not single projects or events, that together create 'good' spaces through the creation of the five intersecting components of space.

THE NECESSITY OF MULTIPLE SPACES

In this discussion, we reflect critically on the main insights from our analysis, situating them in relation to the feminist spatial practice discourse and to their implications for practice. Our analysis of 21 organisations in Slovakia and Czechia shows that, contrary to much of the feminist spatial discourse, 'master's tools' can contribute to the making of 'good' spaces. In other words, employing the same mechanisms as the dominant system – modifying land-use plans, designing catalogue houses, using mainstream social media – can support the creation of spaces that nurture care, agency, and justice. Employing mainstream rather than specialised tools makes the creation of 'good' spaces more accessible to practitioners, especially in places where expertise is scarce, such as the post-socialist context. Yet because these practices only become transformative when guided by feminist values, this finding is more relevant for those already positioned within feminist spatial discourse, for whom it broadens the repertoire of possible methods. For practitioners outside the discourse, the distinction may be confusing: if the role of values is not grasped, learning that feminist spatial practitioners often use the same tools as mainstream actors risks obscuring rather than clarifying what makes a practice feminist.

A second contribution of this paper is the framework of five interconnected components of space. This framework aims to provide an operational understanding of space as complex, dynamic, and multiple in ways that practitioners, especially those outside feminist circles, can meaningfully apply. Yet its simplicity poses challenges. By conflating practice and space in one, it mirrors the feminist understanding of space as always becoming, while at the same time translating it into more static, mainstream terminology to enhance legibility. The paper does not explore in depth how processes and spaces interlink, but instead only sketches this connection with examples. Our previous work offers a deeper exploration of participatory spaces (Tabačková & Mravčáková, 2024), but this complexity can remain difficult to grasp, particularly for those outside of feminist discourse. Moreover, the framework's accessibility is double-edged: while it may make the expanded concept of space more tangible, it also risks being co-opted by neoliberal agendas. As mainstream actors also use these components, the framework could be mobilised to produce compelling but exclusionary spaces. The framework thus offers insights into feminist spatial practices and the expanded concept of space, but its transformative potential depends on the political values attached to its use.

All of the above promotes and encourages feminist spatial practice to open up, to embrace accessible, even mainstream methods, tools, and language, while being aware of the risks of co-option by neoliberal frameworks. However, the organisations we examined already operate within this tension (Grešáková, 2025). In addition to using the 'master's tools', these practitioners, for instance, often cooperate with the 'master' – not just to access resources but to directly co-create 'good' spaces. Our earlier paper shows how such close collaborations are, in fact, desired as a means of transforming the system of planning culture itself (Tabačková & Mravčáková, 2024). Another analysis by the author of this paper highlights how these groups create hybrid models to survive within

the post-socialist capitalist ruins, balancing institutional engagement with grassroots autonomy (Grešáková, 2025). Future research should explore how such practices sustain a feminist spatial agenda while existing in proximity to the very systems they seek to change, as well as responding to political shifts, changes in funding, and community needs.

This paper set out to bridge the theory of feminist spatial practice and the practices of organisations in Slovakia and Czechia that are creating ‘good’ spaces, outlining the contributions to theory from practice. We have thus far stated only implicitly what the theory contributes to those involved in the practice by using the discourse throughout the paper to describe the practices. This description is a contribution. Feminist spatial practices, with their attention to values as well as an expanded understanding of space and spatial practice, are uniquely suited to describing the practice of these organisations without leaving out important aspects. The studied organisations are, for now, a dispersed field of diverse practitioners, which makes it difficult to unite them under a common objective. Associating them collectively with the feminist spatial practice, as the exhibition *Beyond Architecture* (2025) attempts to do, could offer a common ground for further action and exchange. Moreover, just as feminism expanded beyond women’s issues towards broader debates on care, power, and justice and continues to evolve with new theories, so could the organisations benefit from an engagement with feminist theories to open reflections about unconscious reproductions for dominant power dynamics or uneven inclusions. However, the perception of feminism as primarily centred on women’s issues, rather than values, poses a significant obstacle in these undertakings. Yet rather than abandoning the term, as some suggest, the task is to continue building awareness of feminism as a value-oriented discourse, so that it can serve as a shared framework for building ‘good’ spaces.

TOWARDS AN ACCESSIBLE FEMINIST SPATIAL PRACTICE

This paper has demonstrated that feminist spatial practice provides a viable framework for creating ‘good’ spaces, even when practitioners do not explicitly identify with feminism. By analysing the practices of 21 organisations in Slovakia and Czechia, we have shown that spatial justice in this context is driven not by specialised feminist methodologies but rather by widely accessible tools. The contribution of these practitioners lies not in the uniqueness of their methods but in how they connect different spatial components – physical, representational, pedagogical, participatory, and communal. The five components presented in this study capture the complexity of ‘good’ spaces for groups deprived of adequate space in neoliberal society, showing how these spaces are more than physical interventions and are constructed through an intersection of multiple spaces and across multiple scales. Further research is needed into the applicability of this framework as an analytical and design tool, as well as into the individual components themselves, to better understand concrete tools that make them, while foregrounding feminist values.

The findings also offer a critical perspective on the global discourse of feminist spatial practice. Whereas much of this discourse remains highly theoretical, exclusive, and embedded in elite academic language, the realities observed in Slovakia and Czechia tell a different story. Due to the region’s historical trajectory, feminism arrived later, at a time when global feminist theory had already become increasingly complex and detached from mainstream practice. Yet in these post-socialist conditions, spatial practitioners have developed hybrid spatial strategies working with the ‘master’s tools’, often operating within capitalism rather than outside it. Their work challenges the assumption that feminist spatial practices should reject the neoliberal tools and environments. This hybridity presents a valuable insight for global feminist movements. The study highlights that feminist spatial practice should not be confined to exclusive discourse but should be made more accessible and actionable. If feminist spatial knowledge is to influence mainstream urban planning and architecture, it must be understandable and applicable beyond academic and activist circles. This research contributes to a broader rethinking of feminist spatial practice – not as a niche field but as a necessary and adaptable tool for creating ‘good’ spaces centred on care, empowerment, and inclusion.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank all organisations and individuals who participated in this research and shared their time, experiences, and insights. We also acknowledge the broader community of practitioners in Slovakia and Czechia, whose work continues to shape the field of feminist spatial practices.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Ethical statement

This research is based on qualitative interviews, engagement with the *Beyond Architecture* (2025) exhibition, and long-term fieldwork. All participants gave informed consent. The research follows ethical standards for qualitative and feminist research, including reflexivity, care, and respect for communication partners. Formal IRB approval was not required according to the institutional guidelines of the authors' affiliations.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Author contributions

LG and ZT: Research conceptualisation; LG and ZT: Methodology; LG and ZT: Investigation; ZT: Analysis; ZT: Writing – original draft; LG and ZT: Writing – review & editing; ZT: Visualisation.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to the sensitive and relational nature of the research but are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

AI disclosure

Generative AI (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used in a limited capacity for language editing and structuring of selected passages. All outputs were critically reviewed, revised, and integrated by the authors. No AI-generated content was adopted without substantial modification. The authors retain full responsibility for the content.

Biographical sketch

Zuzana Tabačková is a researcher and lecturer in urban planning at TU Berlin (Germany) and a member of Spolka. She holds a master's degree in architecture. Her work operates between design, research, and education. Her expertise lies in spatial practice, with a focus on feminist approaches to space-making, participatory design, public urban spaces, and educational environments. Since 2018, she has been involved in teaching and research exploring socially engaged and interdisciplinary approaches to urban development.

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Research paper

Feminist Spatial Practices: Queering Rural Periphery Through Spatial Activism

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

Citation: Novik, N. (2026). Feminist spatial practices: Queering rural periphery through spatial activism. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(2), Article 19. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/19067>

Published: August 26, 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper explores feminist spatial practices operating outside traditional boundaries of architectural profession, focusing on self-organised spatial activism in rural Sweden. It centres on the art collective *Not Quite*, operating from the premises of a former paper mill in Fengersfors, Dalsland. Founded over two decades ago by craft-makers, the collective has cultivated a vibrant cultural space in a peripheral region. While *Not Quite* is not explicitly named a feminist collective, its activities are largely sustained by women and non-binary individuals and informed by queer-feminist organisational models. In response to the threatened sale of its premises, the collective acquired and began restoring an abandoned carpentry workshop, using craft techniques and repair to reclaim space and foster community. These acts of maintenance are framed as feminist spatial practices—concrete, collective interventions that challenge capitalist development logics and dominant urban planning models. The paper situates these practices within broader discussions of the ethics of care, commoning, and diverse economies, positioning architecture not as a static form, but an ongoing, relational process. Through participatory action research, the study highlights how collective repair practices serve as both spatial and political strategies, offering grassroots, smaller-scale, community-oriented approaches of living and making together at the margins.

Keywords: feminist spatial practices, maintenance, commons, craft, care

Feminist traditions in architecture have come a long way—not only through theoretical articulations but also through concrete practices carried out by collectives such as Matrix, MUF, Fatale, and others. Within the construction sector itself, numerous initiatives began to emerge in the 1980s that sought to challenge gendered hierarchies and bring feminist perspectives into building industry. In their iconic work *Making Space: Women and the Man-Made Environment*, Matrix (1984) critically examine the social and material conditions that shape the production of the built environment. Their analysis foregrounds two interrelated dimensions: the patriarchal structures that determine who holds the authority to decide and the consequent absence of women from decision-making processes; and secondly how environments are conceived and constructed within the “man-made world”, fail to produce spatial forms that address concrete needs of the groups excluded from the normative process.

In Sweden, one prominent example is the network now known as *Alstra* (formerly *Kvinnors Byggsforum*, or ‘Women’s Building Forum’). Initially, the organization concentrated on issues of diversity within the construction industry and the underrepresentation of women in the field. However, with the growing influence of feminist and

queer-feminist¹ epistemologies, its focus has expanded—shifting toward more critical engagements with space, gender, and power within architectural discourse and tackling large discourse of spatial practices beyond building industry redefining practices.

What makes feminist spatial practices particularly distinct is their consistent reflection on practice itself, articulated through the lens of critical spatial practices (Rendell, 2018; Schalk, et al. 2016; Petrescu, 2007). While engaging with feminist theory, these practices often emphasize a much stronger relationship to lived, material practice—especially in terms of ethics. It is this ethical dimension of practice that is foregrounded here, with a focus on how feminist spatial practices function as forms of “altering practice” (Petrescu, 2007)—actively challenging dominant modes of spatial production by reshaping relationships, responsibilities, and modes of engagement within the built environment.

Feminist nomadic practices, as articulated by Rosi Braidotti (2011), offer a generative conceptual framework for rethinking architecture not as a static or immutable entity, but as a dynamic assemblage of relations, materialities, and affects that continuously evolve. Nomadic theory advances a process ontology that privileges transformation, fluidity, and becoming over fixity and permanence. In this sense, architectural space is understood as contingent and performative—constantly produced through movements, encounters, and negotiations that shape subjectivities and modes of living. As Braidotti notes, “only the majority can be static, self-replicating and sterile” (Braidotti, 2011), a provocation that underscores how dominant, homogenizing systems rely on stasis and repetition, whereas minoritarian or nomadic practices open up spaces for creativity, difference, and ethical transformation.

This reflects a broader understanding of feminist spatial practice, where design and construction are viewed as ongoing, relational processes rather than fixed or final outcomes. This in-between position—between theory and practice, between public and private, and between art and architecture—is also central to Jane Rendell’s early definition of critical spatial practice, where the emphasis lies in navigating and questioning boundaries through situated, reflective work (Rendell, 2006). Schalk et al. (2017) argue that “feminist spatial practice envisions structural and systemic change through social, economic, and aesthetic alternatives on the micro level, and that they act as seeds of transformation”.

As pointed out by Braidotti (2011) that “central to this feminist nomadic politics is the embrace of complexity, situatedness, accountability, and the localization of partial perspectives”. This also means that feminist futures are therefore not restricted to women but encompass alternative future forms of human and non-human relations that imply radical societal transformation of systems and structures that create and sustain patriarchal hierarchies (Schalk et al., 2017). These futures propose radical shifts that are grounded in the relational and situated dynamics of lived experiences, advocating for a world shaped by collective care and interconnected agency. Similarly, Jane Rendell (2018) conceptualised feminist spatial practice drawing connections between de Certeau’s strategies and Lefebvre’s representations of space on the one hand, and de Certeau’s tactics and Lefebvre’s spaces of representation on the other, she suggests a “distinction between practices (strategies) that operate to maintain and reinforce existing social and spatial orders, and those practices (tactics) that seek to critique and question them. It is the latter one that becomes ‘critical spatial practice’ – a term which serves to describe both everyday activities and creative practices which seek to resist the dominant social order of global corporate capitalism (Rendell, 2018).

THINKING FEMINIST SPATIAL PRACTICES THROUGH DIVERSE ECONOMIES AND DEGROWTH PERSPECTIVE

Degrowth represents a paradigm that extends beyond economic systems or critique of perpetual growth, encompassing broader considerations of organizational forms that can lead to societal transformation (D’Alisa et al, 2014; Kallis, 2018; Schmelzer, et al 2022). This societal transformation takes form in two main dimensions - ecological sustainability and social equality. Chertkovskaya (2022), building on work of Write (2012), brings up three modes of transformation within the degrowth paradigm. In this specific case, it is the interstitial transformation that plays an important role. Interstitial transformations involve building new forms of social empowerment on the margins of capitalist society, usually outside of spaces dominated by those in power (Chertkovskaya, 2022). It refers to practices that resist and build alternatives to major power structures by resisting principles of scalability as a feature of perpetual growth promoted by capitalist systems. Instead of standardising and expanding as strategies of growth, this approach embraces smaller-scale, community-oriented practices often initiated, led and sustained by intentional communities (Chertkovskaya, 2022). While interstitial transformations are not directly subversive in the way that insurgent urbanism might be, they occupy a middle ground between

¹ In the Anglo-American context, queer and feminist studies are often treated as distinct fields. However, in the Swedish context, the term “queer-feminist” has a long-standing tradition, particularly in relation to practical, action-based work. Collectives such as FATALE, MYCKET, ACTION ARCHIVE and others have contributed to shaping and expanding this terminology through their practice-based research since the mid-2000s. I use the term “queer-feminist” here in alignment with their articulations and understandings of the concept.

institutionalized practices and full-scale resistance, operating as a "minor gesture" (Manning, 2016) that creates subtle, yet impactful shifts in societal structures.

As Henri Lefebvre (1991) and Michel de Certeau (1984/2022) have shown, everyday spatial practices are not merely passive or habitual acts, but active modes of producing and negotiating space. This specific relationship between everyday life activities and spatial practice is often articulated through feminist epistemologies (Massey, 2005). These frameworks highlight how daily, lived experiences shape and are shaped by space and vice versa. Therefore, feminist spatial practices are often seen as practices conducted by non-spatial or architectural practitioners, on the margins of the professional practice. Those non-architectural spatial practices often respond to day-to-day necessities, and spatial practices therefore are mobilised to produce commons. This perspective also responds to Federici's (2020) claim that as women were historically excluded from financial life and formal economic structures, they had to rely more heavily on the commons. Similarly, Bradley (2014, p.185) argues that peer-based commons production often emerges through everyday practices rather than within formal organizations or political programs. These alternative forms of production are created collectively and informally, and they hold the potential to transform socio-economic systems from the ground up. As a result, practices of commoning—sharing resources, collaborating, sustaining communities—became closely associated with everyday activities (De Angelis, 2017). These seemingly ordinary actions, often overlooked, are in fact central to how space is produced, maintained, and shared. This perspective underscores the importance of the commons as a foundational element for collaborative and low-impact ways of living. It prompts critical reflection on how we inhabit, construct, and organize spaces, advocating for a reimagining of architectural and urban practices through the lens of collective care.

METHODOLOGY: PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH + FEMINIST SUBJECTIVITY + INVENTIVE METHODS

This paper explores a case of a self-organised cultural centre in rural periphery in Sweden. Urbanisation, as a process closely tied to modernisation, has long swept through the rural landscape, reshaping its social, economic, and spatial dynamics. Here, feminist spatial practice extends beyond analysing how spatial order is constructed—it moves toward actively destabilising that order (Schalk et al., 2017). This is achieved through queer-feminist forms of organising that are grounded in craft and maintenance as spatial practices. I argue that these approaches challenge dominant spatial norms by centering care, collaboration, and the everyday actions as tools for reimagining and reshaping rural periphery through queer-feminist spatial practice.

My engagement with *Not Quite* began in 2012, when I first encountered one of its co-founders during a workshop. Since then, my relationship with the collective and its site in Fengersfors has evolved through multiple roles—researcher, collaborator, participant, visitor, and friend. This multiplicity of positions has shaped a situated and reflexive approach, grounded in feminist epistemologies that value subjectivity, relationality, and embodied knowledge (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Not Quite



Note: Image by the author

The research uses mixed-method approach, combining ethnographic and autoethnographic methods with principles of participatory action research. Fieldwork involved multiple visits to the site during both active and dormant periods of the cultural season. These visits included participant observation, photographic and written documentation, and both structured and semi-structured interviews with members of the collective. Walking interviews, workshops, and informal encounters provided additional insight into the rhythms of everyday life at *Not Quite*.

To explore feminist forms of organising and maintenance practices, I employed what Lury and Wakeford (2012) describe as inventive *methods*—approaches that generate knowledge through collaboration and experimentation rather than extraction. Drawing on Law’s (2004) argument that methods do not merely describe but also produce the world, I treated research devices as tools for collective inquiry. Inspired by Phillips’s (2012) discussion of the *list* as a dispositif—a relational mechanism that organizes and enables action—I designed a workshop with women and non-binary members of the collective. Using everyday objects such as seed packets, measuring tapes, screwdrivers, notebooks, and knitting needles as conversational prompts, we reflected on commoning practices and the intersections between artistic, domestic, and maintenance work (Figure 2).

These material and dialogical exercises illuminated how mundane activities intertwine with collective organisation, revealing the micro-strategies through which common space is continually made and sustained (Stavrvides, 2018). In this sense, practice itself becomes a mode of inquiry—an embodied, situated way of thinking that produces understanding through doing.

Figure 2

Workshop at Strands



Note: Image by the author

CONTEXT OF *NOT QUITE*—A LIFE OF THE RURAL ARTIST COLLECTIVE

Fengersfors is a village of approximately three hundred inhabitants situated in the municipality of Åmål, within the Dalsland region of southwestern Sweden. This rural area is renowned for its natural landscapes, characterized by extensive forests, numerous lakes, and agricultural land concentrated in the southern parts. The region has a low population density, which has steadily declined over recent decades. Historically, Fengersfors developed as an industrial settlement that emerged around the Lisefors ironworks at the end of the eighteenth century. In 1882, the ironworks were converted into a wood-grinding mill, and a decade later, in 1892, a company was established to construct a chemical pulp and paper mill. The paper mill initially prospered due to the production of so-called ‘ocean paper,’ a moisture-resistant material widely used for packaging. However, with the increasing prevalence of plastic during the 1950s and 1960s, global demand for ocean paper declined, leading to the mill’s bankruptcy in 1968. The facility was permanently closed ten years later. For several decades thereafter, the site remained abandoned, resulting in significant decay of the premises. It was not until 2000 that the abandoned

industrial complex found new life when the artist collective *Not Quite* was established and began renting the vacant space.

Not Quite is a collective of artists and makers consisting of around sixty members most of whom have educational background in craft. Alongside its industrial heritage, Dalsland also possesses a long-standing tradition of craft education that dates back to the 1920s. Initially established as vocational training for boys during the 1930s, this educational trajectory evolved through the foundation of Stenebyskolan in the 1940s and eventually became integrated into university-level education during the 1990s and early 2000s. This enduring legacy of craft education within the region played a significant role as catalysts in the development of *Not Quite*. Numerous members of the collective are either graduates, teachers, or current students of these institutions, with many choosing to settle in the rural landscape upon completing their education.

Not Quite operates as both an artist collective and an economic association, uniting individual practitioners under a shared organizational framework. The former industrial mill now accommodates a diverse range of enterprises, including a bakery, café, art shop, and printing house, which serve as public-facing components of the site (Figure 3). Complementing these are extensive facilities that support artistic production, including well-equipped workshops for wood, metal, photography, textiles, and ceramics, alongside a large exhibition hall. Within the premises, members maintain a combination of shared and private studios.

Figure 3

A map of Not Quite.



Note: Image by the author

ORGANISING AS COMMONING

As *Not Quite* has developed into an established cultural centre in a remote rural setting, both gradually reshaping it and connecting to the industrial history surrounding village and the broader region of Dalsland. The specificity of rural living—marked by physical proximity, shared resources, and limited infrastructure—has fostered forms of interdependence among the members of the collective that differ significantly from urban models of collective engagement. Within this context, *Not Quite* has evolved into what can be described as an *intentional community*—a self-organized collective of individuals united by shared values, mutual trust, and a strong ethic of social support. The community's practices are often characterised by principles of voluntary simplicity, emphasising collaboration, reciprocity, and care over competition or profit. Intentional community is drastically distinct from the more assumed or predefined

notions of “community” often invoked in urban planning discourse, where the term may refer to fixed social categories such as “families,” “youth,” or “skaters,” often defining consumer groups then actual social networks. In contrast, through these relational and ethical commitments, *Not Quite* fosters forms of association and collective work that challenge conventional, market-oriented models of organization.

The notion of the intentional community can be productively situated within the theoretical frameworks of diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006) and degrowth (D’Alisa et al., 2014). Many intentional communities such as co-housing cooperatives, ecovillages, and other forms of collective living – actively experiment with reimagining social and economic relations beyond capitalist and neoliberal logics of production, accumulation, and consumption. While *Not Quite* does not engage in collective living in the traditional sense, it operates as a space for collective working, existing deliberately outside or on the margins of market-oriented agendas. Its organisational ethos reflects a form of economic and social experimentation that aligns with Gibson-Graham’s conception of diverse economies, foregrounding cooperation, reciprocity, and shared stewardship as viable alternatives to competitive individualism.

Within the context of the degrowth paradigm, *Not Quite*’s practices embody a critique of progress-oriented development by emphasising care, maintenance, and sufficiency over expansion and efficiency. The collective’s embeddedness in a rural setting further situates its work within a broader ‘Green Wave’ movement, wherein community groups reimagine the countryside as a site of post-growth living and ecological sustainability. Such rural forms of self-organisation operate both within and at the margins of institutional structures, negotiating autonomy while contributing to local resilience. In practical terms, *Not Quite*’s community-based approach manifests through study groups, collaborative workshops, and shared infrastructures that facilitate collective learning and production. These practices constitute an ongoing process of commoning—creating and maintaining shared resources, knowledge, and spaces through mutual care and cooperation.

As a large collective comprising approximately sixty members, *Not Quite* inevitably encounters the organisational complexities inherent in collective governance. To navigate these dynamics, the group adopts what it terms a ‘do-ocracy’—a self-organising mode of governance premised on action, where authority emerges through participation and initiative rather than through formal hierarchies. This practice of ‘organising through doing’ resonates with traditions of craft and artistic production, privileging embodied knowledge, material engagement, and process-oriented collaboration. Within the framework of commons theory, such an approach can be understood as an enactment of commoning, wherein social and spatial organisation arises through situated, collective labour rather than top-down administration. The do-ocratic model not only mitigates stagnation in decision-making but also sustains a pluralistic mode of operation that accommodates the heterogeneous practices, temporalities, and working methods of its members. In this sense, *Not Quite* exemplifies how participatory and process-driven governance can function as both a pragmatic structure and a form of spatial politics.

The context of *Not Quite* collective helps to frame three specific forms of feminist and queer forms of organising space that I explore in this article - *Homogafiska* museum, *Strands* and *Sniqueeri* – a carpenters duo run by two *Not Quite* members.

MAINTENANCE WORK AS A FEMINIST SPATIAL PRACTICE

Like many other cultural centres that do not own the buildings they occupy, *Not Quite* has been renting its space for years. For nearly two decades, the arrangement had worked well: the mill, though privately owned, was leased under favourable conditions. However, when ownership changed, the situation shifted dramatically. The new owners put the building complex on the market at a price that was simply unaffordable for the collective. This sudden change introduced uncertainty and created significant obstacles, ultimately forcing *Not Quite* to begin seeking alternative spaces for their work and community.

Maintenance has been a central practice at *Not Quite* since its inception. The decaying industrial premises demanded continuous care to sustain the functionality of the building. Over time, however, members of the collective became increasingly reluctant to engage in maintenance work, as each act of repair and improvement effectively raised the property’s market value—rendering the site less attainable for collective ownership and more desirable for sale by the landlord. In response to the fluctuating price of the mill, the collective made several attempts to raise funds and explore various models of collective ownership, but without success. In 2021, the collective decided to acquire its own premises—a smaller, more affordable site only twenty-minute walk from the mill. The maintenance of this new building, which was in poor condition at the time of purchase, became the collective’s primary focus and a key form of collaborative labour aimed at restoring and reactivating the space. Within this new context, maintenance emerged not only as a technical task but as an inherently political and ethical practice. Drawing on feminist materialist perspectives, maintenance can be understood as a form of care labour that resists the extractivist logics underpinning capitalist production and property relations. Through collaborative repair, the collective redefined maintenance as a mode of *commoning*—a shared process of sustaining material infrastructures and social relations over time. Framed through the lens of degrowth discourse, these practices

articulate an alternative ethos of sufficiency, interdependence, and continuity, offering a counter-narrative to the disposability and obsolescence that dominate neoliberal spatial production.

Theorists such as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) have emphasized care as an epistemic and ethical mode of engaging with the material world—an affective and practical commitment to sustaining interdependence rather than pursuing mastery or growth. Within this framework, maintenance becomes a critical feminist gesture: an act of *staying with* the site rather than exploiting it. Similarly, Silvia Federici (2012) situates reproductive and maintenance labour as forms of invisible work that uphold the very conditions of life, challenging the gendered hierarchies that devalue care within capitalist economies. From a degrowth perspective, feminist scholars such as Bauhardt and Harcourt (2019) argue that re-centering care, repair, and commoning provides an alternative to productivist logics, foregrounding sufficiency and social reproduction as principles of ecological and economic sustainability. In this sense, *Not Quite*'s engagement with maintenance can be read as both a material and conceptual intervention: a reclaiming of care labour as collective praxis and a reimagining of the rural as a site of post-growth experimentation. Through acts of repair, the collective not only preserves a building but also performs an ethics of continuity, reciprocity, and shared responsibility that counters the disposability embedded in contemporary spatial production.

In the context of self-organised cultural spaces, maintenance is often perceived as a *transactional practice*—a means of ensuring access in exchange for labour, to put it simply. This dynamic manifests in various arrangements, such as token rents, agreements with municipalities, or leasing systems specifically designed for decaying buildings. These decaying environments are frequently treated as the sole viable venues for cultural activities, reinforcing the notion that culture must inhabit spaces of decline. In such arrangements, the values assigned to maintenance and the spaces themselves become a critical point of reflection, shaping the dynamics of cultural production and eco-social care of these practices. These collective repair practices not only serve as acts of spatial reclamation but also function as pedagogical sites (Graziano and Trogal, 2017), fostering knowledge exchange and skill development while promoting a more inclusive and sustainable approach to spatial production.

QUEERING THE PERIPHERY

Homografiska, is a queer museum. Constructed in 2020 in the park area of *Not Quite* café by one of the members, Funny Livdotter, *Homografiska* is as an artistic project and one of the smallest museums in Sweden. Built from plywood and shaped like a container, the museum occupies an area of only a few square meters, embodying a minimal yet powerful statement: “History has always been subjective”. Encountered for the first time the museum might seem like a temporary installation. However, despite looking as a small container it does indeed operate as a fully functioning institution. It runs exhibitions, it has a director, a board, and it commissions artworks for the museum collection (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Homografiska museet.



Note: Image curtesy of Homografiska museet

In Swedish, the name “*Homografiska*” is a play on words referring to large institutions such as “*Fotografiska*” and other “-iska” museums; this pun intends to emphasise that traditional museum institutions often fail to

acknowledge the inherent biases within their structures, perpetuating patriarchal frameworks and reinforcing existing power dynamics often neglecting alternative narratives. This reflection inspired a playful reimagining, a conceptual "Homografiska", envisioned by Funny around fifteen years ago. The history of the museum starts as such: in 2020 Funny with another member of *Not Quite* collective Emelie Rygfelt Wilander were making a member exhibition at the mill. Paraphrasing Judy Chicago's iconic *Dinner Party*, their project featured a massive table where every member of the collective was given a seat. It culminated in a grand celebration, complete with a performance by drag performer Butcher Queen. In the creative aftermath of the exhibition, a significant amount of plywood material was left over. These conditions, combined with a long-term vision, culminated in the creation of a temporary space for a queer art — *Homografiska*. The material from the table was repurposed into a container, reflecting the common artistic principle of reusing available resources. Nothing is trash for an artist.

Neither Funny themselves, nor *Not Quite* as a collective, had an intention that the museum will become a permanent part of *Not Quite*. It happened by chance. The original concept was to design something mobile, a "museum on wheels" that can travel around. However, the landowner of the mill imposed a peculiar restriction: no structures on wheels were permitted. This unexpected limitation inadvertently transformed the museum into a permanent fixture, diverging from its initial intention of temporality and mobility. The permanence of the museum was accidental. *Homografiska* doesn't pay a rent to be at *Not Quite*'s land—since it is a member's art project it operates rent-free. More than that, there a few maintenance arrangements with *Not Quite* done is exchanged for what can be seen as "consensual pinkwashing,"² where access to land and even minimal utilities is granted in return for the art collective's alignment with LGBTQIA+ initiatives. Within precarious position and constant efforts to obtain institutional grant systems, this alignment often serves as a significant form of leverage for *Not Quite* as a whole. It is a mutual support structure.

Although *Homografiska* is an individual artistic project rather than a formal part of the collective practice, it operates through ethics of care in its organization and approach. The museum aims to provide a platform and physical space for artists who may not hold legitimate status within Sweden's bureaucratic cultural funding systems. This subversive model offers visibility and support to queer artists by commissioning, exhibiting, and archiving their works. Despite its modest container-based structure, the museum's archive is intended to endure indefinitely, serving as both a symbolic gesture and a critique of the institutionalized art world. By establishing a small museum on the periphery, *Homografiska* challenges dominant cultural norms, creating a space for queer representation and fostering a sense of belonging outside mainstream institutional frameworks.

The significance of the periphery takes centre stage in understanding the creation of *Homografiska* Museum. For Funny, establishing this museum in a rural setting was essential. Having grown up in the countryside, they sought to unpack what it means to be an artist on the periphery, particularly within institutionalised and historically centralised art systems. Funny reflects that, while a project like this might gain significant interest in Stockholm—where a queer space within established institutions would be highly desirable—the logistical and financial challenges, such as finding a space and affording rent, would make it far more difficult to realise there. For *Homografiska* this specific rural territory plays a significant role in conveying its message. Both its location and the way it was crafted speak to its purpose. By situating the museum outside urban art centres and embracing a DIY ethos, *Homografiska* not only challenges conventional notions of where art and culture belong but also redefines the possibilities of creative expression on the periphery. This deliberate choice highlights the unique relationship between territory, spatial content form of making and the museum's mission.

As any museum *Homografiska* puts an important focus on archiving the collection. Instead of focusing on uncovering historical queer practices or stories of the past—work already undertaken by other initiatives—*Homografiska* engages with the "euphoric present." by commissioning artworks. In this approach, the material presence of the museum takes on profound significance making it tangible and real. The ability for an audience to physically enter the museum and experience its work provides a stronger, more visceral statement than niche-oriented approaches to collecting stories and works. Plywood alone was enough to create this magical space.

While many cultural spaces embrace self-building as a practice, it often takes the form of experimentation or a playful project. Practices such as tactical urbanism, DIY and pop-up architecture and many others that employ working with temporary, spontaneous hands-on techniques often take an informal nature. In contrast, *Homografiska*, which might look like informal structure from a first glance, represents a purposeful act of subverting institutional restrictions of architectural practice through the act of crafting. It embodies queer use, where use becomes a continuous exercise in reimagining and redefining. As Sara Ahmed suggests, "to use is also to put something to practice" (Ahmed, 2019). The notion of "use" is not always aligned with an object's intended function. Instead, it reveals the properties of the object in action and opens possibilities for its subversion, reinterpretation, and reinvention. *Homografiska* exemplifies this principle, challenging conventional notions of function and space while creating a site for alternative practices and meanings of the queer space.

² Quote from the interview with Funny Livdotter

Often, queer space is understood through the lens of marginalised identities, LGBTQ+ liberation, and underground party culture. While these are important aspects, queer space—when considered in relation to spatial practice—can encompass much more. Queer space is not only about marginal experiences; it can also be a site of resistance and transformation not only engaging with bodies that are different, but in a larger sense as an approach to politics that embodied subjectivities (Jobst and Stead, 2023). Queer space is often understood as a form of disobedience—a hidden, alternative realm that exists outside dominant norms. It is frequently associated with private or domestic spaces, tucked away behind closed doors, away from the public eye. These spaces have historically offered safety, intimacy, and resistance in the margins. In the case of *Homografiska*, however, queer space becomes something more: a space of queer joy, visibility, and self-determination. It takes an opposite approach to queer space; here queer space becomes clearly visible, present and material; however, it does not intend to occupy grand space to create what can be called a formal institution. Rather than functioning as a conventional institution, it is a self-organized initiative that reclaims presence and agency within the context of the rural periphery. It further challenges the notion that queer culture belongs only to urban centres, asserting instead that queer life and politics can thrive—and transform—on the margins in rural periphery.

The form of the museum, and the way it is constructed using concrete craft skills and recycled plywood, connects closely to the concept of *cross-cladding*—a term introduced by Bonnevier (2007). This concept blends the idea of *cross-dressing* from queer theory with *cladding* from architectural theory, offering a lens through which to understand how identity and space intersect. Bonnevier's work, including her analysis of the Swedish author Selma Lagerlöf's house in Mårbacka³, explores how domestic spaces can embody layered meanings—challenging fixed norms of gender, function, and design. In this context, the museum becomes more than a structure; it becomes a spatial expression of queer and feminist resistance, shaped through accessible materials and alternative building practices. The term links the theatrical performance of gender and sexuality with the masking and dressing of architecture. "Cross-cladding" as a perspective on architecture functions in response to, and possibly distorts, expectations and given truths. It operates as an analytical tool for the queer critique of the normative interpretation of buildings (Bonnevier, 2007). Examining *Homografiska* and *Not Quite*, the question arises what defines architecture as architecture? How architectural value is assessed and what is deemed proper or complete. Is architecture measured by a progress-oriented vision of polished, sleek structures, or can meaningful aspects of life unfold within self-build, imperfect spaces? Observing how *Homografiska* subverts the industrial heritage of the mill village reveals a reimagining of its future as a queer periphery, queer as a way of knowing and practicing. Through this lens, architecture becomes more than a physical or material structure—it emerges as a medium for challenging norms, and reshaping narratives tied to place and identity.

The rural periphery is often perceived through a progress-oriented lens as "underdeveloped"—either as a place in transition, on its way to becoming something else, or as a space frozen in time and closely tied to notions of "tradition." It is rarely associated with art, culture, or feminist politics—which are frequently relegated to the status of marginal experiments in such contexts. At the same time, the rural periphery offers the possibility to create alternative spatial practices—practices that might not find space or support within central urban contexts. In these peripheral settings, there is room to reimagine and enact ways of living, organizing, and making that challenge dominant norms and open up new forms of cultural and political expression.

ON THE MARGINS OF ARCHITECTURAL WORK: FEMINIST SPATIAL PRACTICES AT THE INTERSECTION OF MAINTENANCE AND CRAFT

While *Not Quite* is not explicitly defined as a feminist collective, much of its work is shaped by queer-feminist models of organization and collaboration. As a group of craft makers, the collective's activities go beyond cultural production to encompass material practices of shaping and sustaining shared spaces. In this context, relationship between necessary maintenance and craft as an artistic practice and skill, becomes clearly pronounced, as a way of caring for the environment and reimagining rural peripheries through a queer and feminist lens. Although existing literature often emphasises the precarious working conditions and multifaceted roles of women artists in rural settings (Mathisen et al, 2024; Mahon et al, 2018), my focus lies elsewhere. I examine how artistic practices actively contribute to the production of space—how they organise, build, and sustain alternative forms of spatial engagement. From this perspective, these practices can be understood as feminist spatial practices that emerge from outside the conventional boundaries of the architectural profession (Figure 5).

Care has traditionally been relegated to the private sphere and, as a result, separated from the realm of architecture (Tronto, 2013; Krasny, 2022). Similarly, crafting practices—often associated with domesticity—have

³ Selma Lagerlöf is a prominent Swedish author, known not only for her literary achievements but also for her unique presence in Swedish cultural history. Coming from a wealthy background, she inherited an estate in Värmland—a rural farming region in central Sweden, just north of Dalsland. Lagerlöf undertook extensive renovations of the estate, deliberately subverting the traditional cladded timber façades typically associated with the idealized image of "Swedishness." As a queer person, her approach to the redesign of the estate reflected resistance to conventional gender and national norms.

been historically assigned a feminine role, as discussed in post-craft discourse (Coles, and Rossi, 2022). At the same time, another cultural trope persists: the romanticised figure of the male craftsman engaged in “real” work, often associated with manual labour, as seen in narratives by Richard Sennett’s *The Craftsman* (2008). However, crafting is deeply connected not only to “making” of the architecture in terms of productions but often even more important to the upkeep of architecture, playing a vital role in its continued existence. Maintenance, in this sense, is not separate from architecture—it is an act of producing architecture, of keeping it alive.

Figure 5

Tools at Strands



Note: Image by the author

Krasny (2022) describes how the divide between architecture and care is built through the separation of architect and craftsman. Emphasizing Alberti’s perspective, she highlights that the distinction between the skilled workman and the architect lies in the latter’s intellect and creativity—qualities that elevate the architect to the status of a master. When architecture is positioned in this way, the architect is seen as a thoughtful and inventive figure, with emphasis placed on creation through function and shelter.

“Care trouble in architecture points to gendered knowledge power, the division of labour underlying the architecture-care divide as well as the historical exclusion of women from the concept of the architect.”

(Krasny, 2022, p. 32)

Craft, as a practice, becomes juxtaposed to architecture through the lens of care politics. This contrast is not accidental. The community around *Not Quite*, for example, was formed by craftspeople whose practical skills were directly applicable to the creation and maintenance of space. In this context, craft is not only a form of skilled labour—it also becomes a mode of collective organization. It enables communities to gather around creative work that demands certain competencies, shared responsibility, and mutual support. Craft, then, emerges as both a productive and social force—one that challenges traditional divisions between making and maintaining, between design and care. This is illustrated through various examples of practice at *Not Quite*, such as the window renovation workshop that took place during the *Trans Europe Halles* meeting in 2022. This conference is typically structured to provide space for cultural workers to engage in collective conversations and develop shared strategies for the future of cultural centres. In this context, the window renovation workshop served as a concrete example of the everyday challenges faced by many cultural spaces—particularly the struggle to maintain and renovate infrastructure with limited resources and support. The workshop not only addressed a practical need and offered practical skills but also embodied the collective, hands-on spirit that characterises much of *Not Quite* work, bridging the gap between physical labour, cultural practice, and community-building.

Similarly, another initiative driven by members of *Not Quite* is *Sniqueeri*, a duo of “fine carpenters” and artists who regularly organise community workshops specifically for queer groups where participants learn wood carving, woodworking, repairing techniques and more. Woodworking and carpentry, traditionally viewed as male-dominated professions, often remain unwelcoming and exclusive for others. By creating these community events, *Sniqueeri* offers a safe and inclusive space for creative experimentation, collective learning, and queer joy through craft making. Their workshops not only provide access to practical skills but also foster a sense of belonging and empowerment within a supportive, queer-affirming environment. These practices subvert above mentioned assumptions on carpentry work and foster collective action by creating *public sites of repair*. They operate through pedagogies that cultivate a “desire to participate in constructing political alternatives to capitalism” (Graziano and Trogal, 2017) and constructing “other worlds” (Roelvink et al, 2015; Gibson-Graham, 2014; Schalk et al., 2017).

The social nature of collective repair can become a “powerful moment of politicization” (Graziano and Trogal, 2017), particularly when it extends beyond environmental concern and is recognised as a potential site for anti-work tactics, engaging in forms of extra-disciplinary preoccupation. Ultimately, craft also has deep communal roots (Dormer, 2022, p. 94) and the workshop itself (both as a facility and as an activity) is based on cooperation (Coles & Rossi, 2022, p. 148). Within this context, collective and queer approaches to craft can be understood not just as aesthetic or technical practices, but as spatial practices—ones that reimagine how we relate to labour, to each other, and to the environments we inhabit.

Not Quite operates on a seasonal basis, typically from May to September, largely due to practical and infrastructural limitations. The old paper mill, vacant since the late 1970s, remains largely unrenovated and is used in its existing state—without heating or many basic utilities. Despite these challenges, the site continues to thrive as a cultural hub, attracting around 25,000 visitors to the village each year. Maintenance—or more precisely, the lack of it—was a key factor that pushed *Not Quite* to begin searching for new premises. The deteriorating condition of the former paper mill, where the collective had been based, made year-round operation increasingly difficult. Without proper heating and with mounting maintenance issues, the space became unsuitable for continuous use. Although renovations were necessary, the cost was far beyond the collective's means.

The lack of completeness of an “unfinished” built environment transforms maintenance into a daily, improvisational act of survival and adaptation. This highlights the idea that maintenance is not merely reactive, corrective or related to post occupancy (Sample, 2016), but it actively produces and shapes environments. It challenges the notion of maintenance as a secondary or derivative process. Building on Lefebvre’s ideas about the production of space as a social and political process that is continuously created and practiced, maintenance, too, is more than just preserving order or keeping things the same. It actively reproduces space. Through everyday micro-strategies and acts of care, maintenance becomes a quiet form of activism, continually shaping how space is lived and experienced ([Figure 6](#)).

Figure 6

Entrance to strands



Note: Image by the author

SPATIAL ACTIVISM AS A PATHWAY TOWARD POST-GROWTH UTOPIAS IN THE NOW

The relationship between activism and utopian thinking is often articulated through concepts like “utopia in the real” or “nowtopias,” where visions of a better world are enacted through tangible actions in the present. Activism, in this sense, includes not only loud and visible forms of protest but also quieter, subtler actions that intervene in public space and foster meaningful change. These spatial practices challenge the notion of activism as spectacle and instead highlight the significance of collective, often informal modes of engagement. Activism becomes a collaborative process that builds community and solidarity, particularly in the context of social movements. Boys and Dwyer (2017) explore feminist activism in architecture through the lens of craft and anti-consumerist production, emphasizing how even the most radical architectural practices remain entangled within capitalist structures and normative socio-spatial relations that govern the production of buildings. They trace how feminist architectural artefacts traverse the boundaries between production and occupation, positioning these artefacts as carriers of critical spatial intervention. Importantly, they stress the unfinished, processual nature of

these interventions, noting that feminist architectural activism often occupies a liminal space—between leisure and labour, between so-called “proper” work (paid, professional, and status-driven) and activities historically relegated to the realm of hobbies or domestic reproduction. In doing so, they challenge the conventional binaries between work and non-work, and draw attention to the uneven, materially embedded trajectories of feminist spatial practices. This perspective also repositions architecture: rather than an industrial, product-driven discipline, it is understood as a practice embedded in everyday life. Through acts of maintenance—those mundane, often invisible forms of care—architecture becomes a means of sustaining, adapting, and inhabiting space. Such practices bring attention to overlooked aspects of spatial production and propose new ways of living and organizing that are rooted in care, collaboration, and resistance.

Emma Dowling and Joan Tronto, in their respective works, discuss the notions of neoliberal care, care politics accessible only to the privileged few—“wealth care” (Tronto, 2013), and the concept of “compassionate capitalism” (Dowling, 2018) cantered on temporary fixes rather than sustainable solutions. Integrating care into the conversation about maintenance helps to reframe it beyond a purely labour-oriented practice, as understood through social reproduction theory, or a purely technical practice, as explored within science and technology studies. This shift allows maintenance to be seen not just as a task or function but as a practice imbued with social, ethical, and relational dimensions.

“Because care emphasizes processes and relationships that extend back and forward through time, and concerning all of the created relationships, applying care theory to architecture would involve making a fundamental shift in perspective: care does not view the completed “thing”—building, park, city zone, etc.—as its object.” (Tronto, 2019)

Through practices of *collective maintenance*, communities can push back against these structures and reclaim the commons, emphasising care and cooperation over extraction and profit. This perspective ties into the broader crisis of care, where societal emphasis on individualism and market-driven values has marginalised the labour of care. Historically, this led to the creation of the domestic sphere, isolating care work within households and stripping it of its collective and communal dimensions. This also relates to what Silvia Federici says about feminist forms of organising:

“It begins with the realization that, as the primary subjects of reproductive work, historically and in our time, women have depended more than men on access to communal resources and have been most committed to their defense.” (Federici; 2020, p. 143)

MICRO-POLITICS IN ORGANISING FOR THE COMMONS

The study examines how micro-strategies (Stratford, 2007) rooted in feminist spatial practices resist growth-oriented paradigms of urban transformation. Here, transformation is understood as encompassing not only physical modifications but also shifts in social relations, practices, and ethical frameworks, reflecting an eco-social approach of interstitial change (Chertkovskaya, 2022). Drawing on Silvia Federici’s critique of capitalist accumulation and reproductive labour, as well as J.K. Gibson-Graham’s exploration of diverse economies, this study highlights alternative modes of spatial production that challenge dominant neoliberal frameworks.

The emphasis on the micro level can take various forms, including what Sandström (2019) describes as “minor urbanism,” where small-scale, nuanced interventions build towards broader urban change. Micro-politics can be simply defined as small intervention to achieve systemic change. Helen Stratford (2007) discusses *micro-strategies of resistance* as subtle confrontations against dominant powers, framing them as “incremental moves” that act as discrete traces within a larger plurality of resistance. Drawing on Foucault’s concept of micro-politics and extending it with Barbara M. Kennedy’s notion of a “micrology of lived experiences,” Stratford describes these transformations as emerging “across and between the space of any fixed subjectivity.” She contends that approaching resistance from the “micro” level involves engaging with the intricacies of everyday life, offering a different way of conceptualising architectural practice and its relationship to power. Such principles challenge static, universality frameworks by emphasising the fluid and context-specific nature of power and agency.

The *Not Quite* collective is organized in a way that resists conventional architectural narratives—it does not aim to create a finished architectural product or undertake complete renovations. Instead, it engages with space in an ongoing, adaptive manner, often based on seasonal use. This specific temporality reflects a different kind of spatial politics—one grounded not just in flexibility, but upkeep, maintenance, and collective care rather than permanence or completion. *Homografoska*, for example—is a micro-museum with a grand message. Though small in scale, it communicates powerful ideas, echoing the micropolitical ethos of *Not Quite*: that even modest, everyday practices can carry significant meaning. Similarly, *Sniqueeri*, a practice within the *Not Quite* collective, reflects the role of craftspeople in shaping and sustaining the space. Their work represents more than skilled labour; it is a form of embedded engagement—a way of being in and with the space that embodies the principles of care, adaptability, and collaborative creation.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has explored how feminist spatial practices emerge within rural contexts, particularly through the repurposing of abandoned industrial heritage for cultural life. It has focused on specific practices—such as cross-cladding, pedagogical sites of repair, and micro-strategies of queer-feminist organising—that reframe maintenance as a spatial practice grounded in a politics of care. These forms of practice function as spatial activism: collective, feminist acts of resistance that challenge dominant architectural norms and propose new ways of engaging with space.

Not Quite's form of community is intentional, shaped through shared practices, care-based labour, and ongoing negotiations of collective *space* which largely relies on trust-based relationships of mutual support. The case of *Not Quite*, a collective of craft makers—particularly textile artists and carpenters—demonstrates how such practices operate. Their practices, while not always producing traditional architecture, are instrumental in creating and sustaining communal and queer spaces. Crafting is understood here as a spatial practice—a way of shaping the built environment through care, adaptation, and collaboration. Maintenance plays a central role in this process. It is embedded in the everyday and tied to material conditions and power relations. Rather than a static or secondary task, maintenance emerges as an improvisational, creative, and political act, unlearning modernist ideals of linear progress and embracing cyclical, regenerative ways of inhabiting space. By stabilising the broken, transforming the neglected, and embracing the mundane, maintenance offers a radical reimagining of care, responsibility, and becomes a necessary framework for reimagining architecture through feminist spatial practices, activism, and collective life.

Acknowledgement

I want to thank editors of the special issue and reviewers for useful feedback and guidance throughout the process of writing this paper. Huge thanks to the members of the *Not Quite* collective for sharing their experiences, thoughts, ways of working and time with me.

Funding

Published in open access with support from Torsten and Wanja Söderberg Foundation's professorship in Design Management

Ethical statement

No ethical issues were identified by the Swedish Ethics Committee

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests

Data availability

The qualitative interview and observational data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations. Anonymized excerpts and supporting materials may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

AI disclosure

No artificial intelligence tools were used for data collection, analysis, or text generation in this manuscript.

Biographical sketch

Natalie Novik is an architect, researcher, and maker working transdisciplinarily. Her practice revolves around topics of self-organisation, commoning, collective care, otherness and belonging. In the centre of her research are independent cultural organisations and their practice of (un)fixing space. Through the methodology of urban curating, she is developing interactive collaborative tools and games for expressing nomadic presence in space. She holds a master's degree in architecture and urban planning, and currently she is a PhD candidate in artistic research at HDK-Valand Academy of Art and Design.

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Research paper

Homemaking and Recreating: The Domestication of Institutional Architecture

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

Citation: Montealegre, P. (2026). Homemaking and recreating: The domestication of institutional architecture. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(2), Article 20. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/19068>

Published: August 26, 2026

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.¹ 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-

¹ 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.

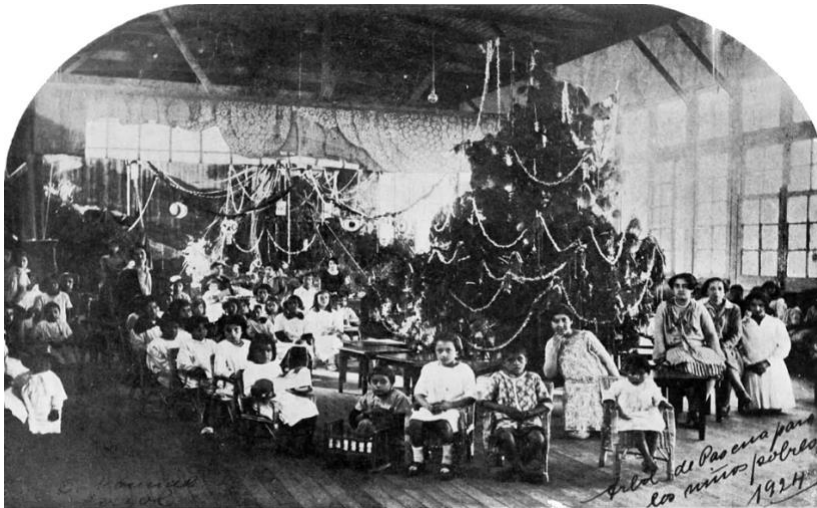
Providing a sense of home and joy to those in care was a practice deeply aligned with the Judeo-Christian roots of charity—*caritas*, from the Latin for dearness or love. In stark contrast, modern surveillance architecture sought to render institutional spaces functional, hygienic, austere, and devoid 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 Chile². 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.

² 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 Hultzsich (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. Hultzsich, 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

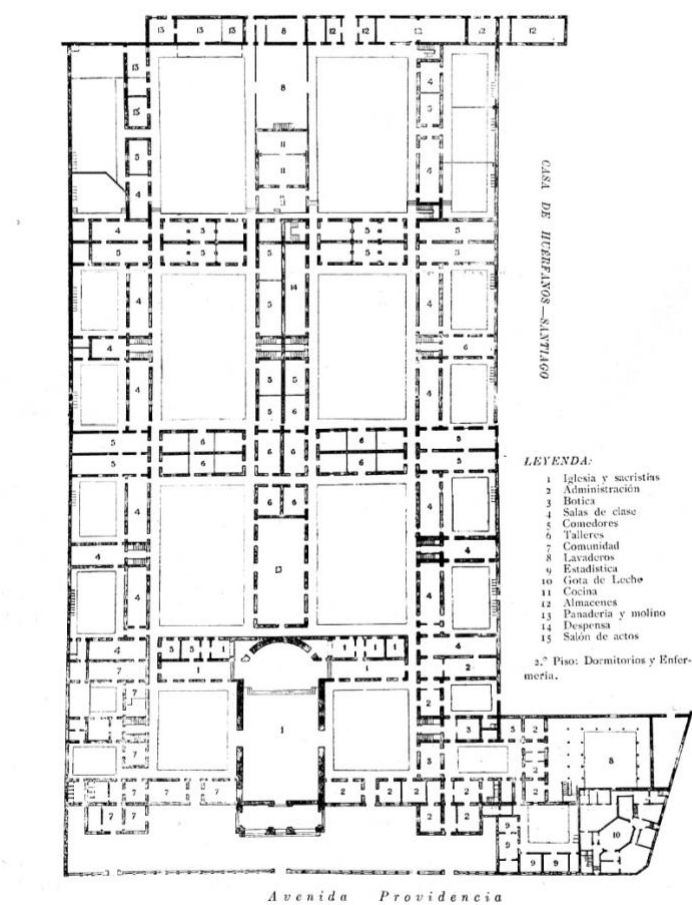
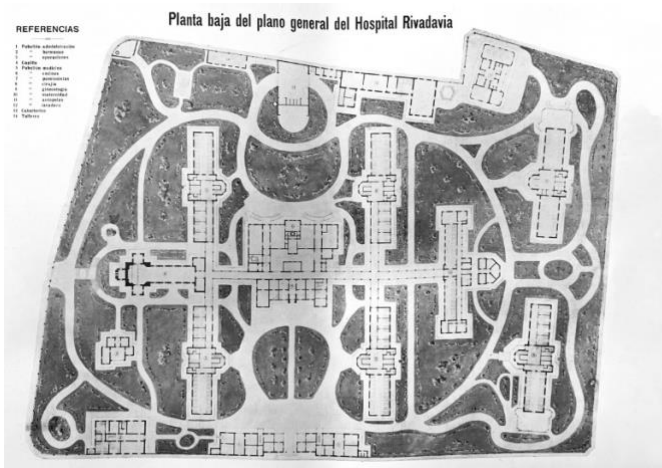
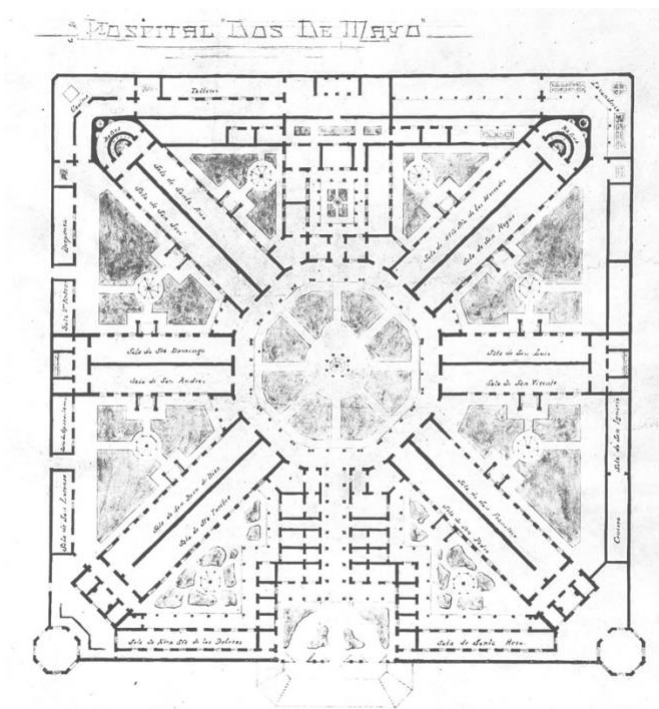


Figure 4
Sewing workshop at the orphans house for girls (Casa de Huérfanas), Buenos Aires, c. 1910



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 activities³.

³ 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.

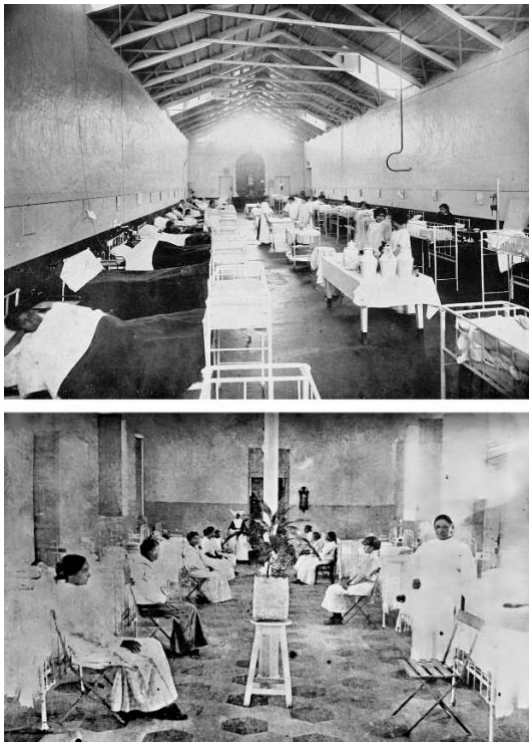
HOMEMAKING AS PLACEMAKING

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

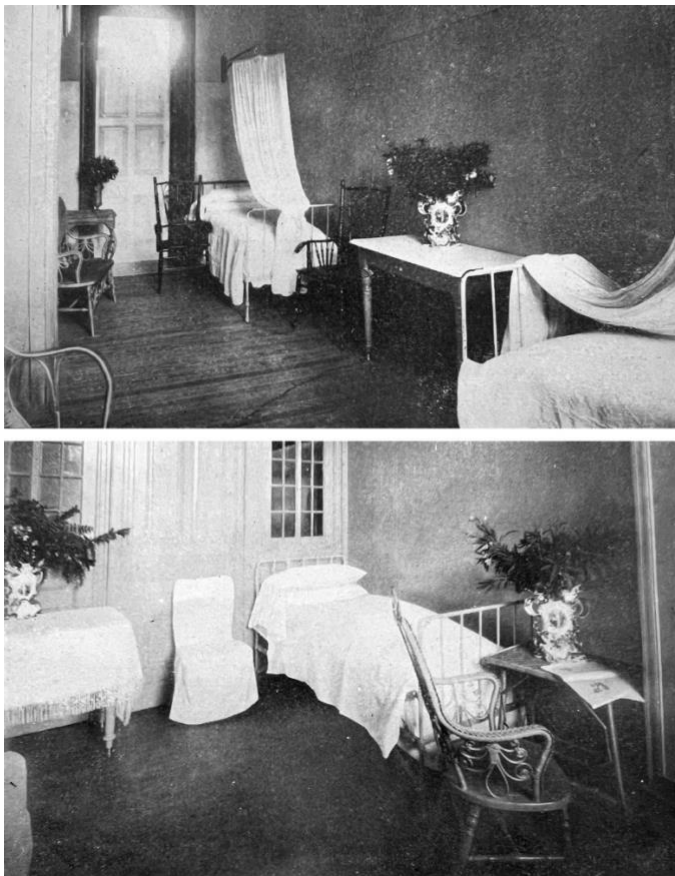


contributions to both built work and theory. Da Cruz Sobral was followed by Julia Guarino in Uruguay (1923), Filandia Pizzul in Argentina (1927), Doris Clark in Peru (1928), and Dora Riedel in Chile (1930). These women were true pioneers, carving out limited spaces within a profession historically dominated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

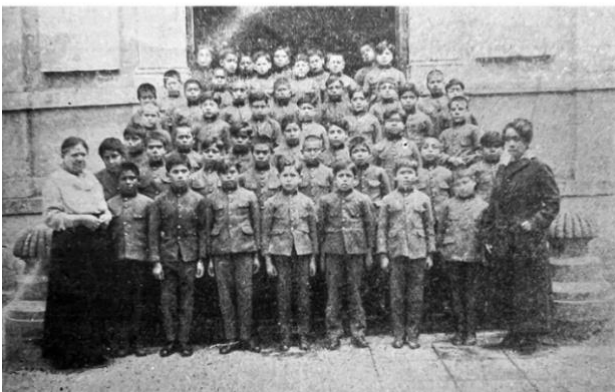
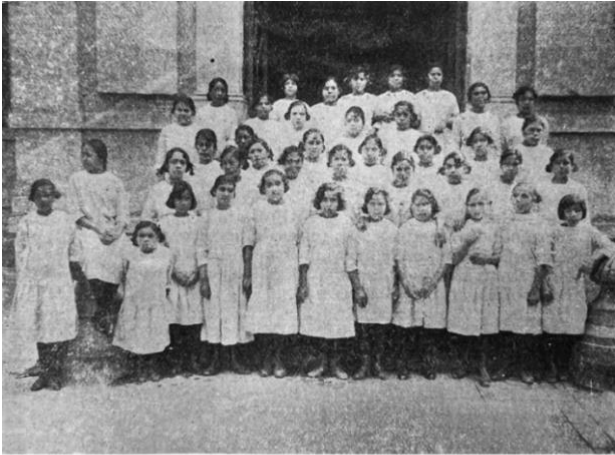


Figure 10

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

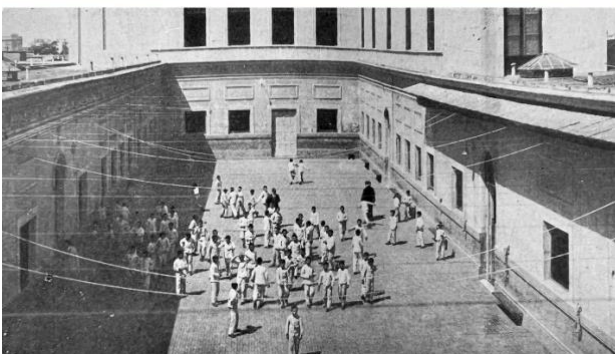


Figure 11

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

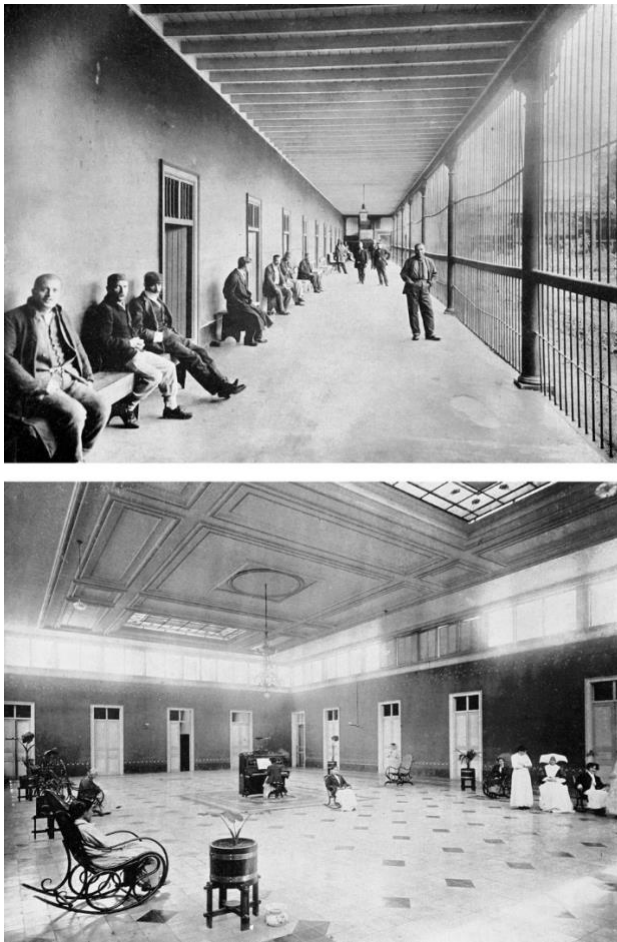


Figure 12

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.

Acknowledgement

All the primary sources were consulted at the library of the Ibero-Amerikanische Institut (IAI) – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin; I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of its kind staff.

Funding

This article forms part of the research project «*Actividades Femeninas*» para una arquitectura del cuidado, 1927 («*Women's Activities*» for a caring city, 1927), Fondecyt Iniciación N° 11240307, funded by the Agencia Nacional de Investigación y Desarrollo (ANID), Chile.

Ethical statement

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.

Author contributions

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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Research paper

Making Space for the Single Woman: Housing, Gender and Social Reform in early 20th Century Europe

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

Citation: von Wyl, J. (2026). Making space for the single woman: Housing, gender and social reform in early 20th century Europe. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(2), Article 21. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/19069>

Published: August 26, 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the material need for independent space for single working women in the early 20th century was addressed through a distinct form of architecture: purpose-built women's residences. At the time, a personal room and independent income were scarce privileges for women, with housing options often limited to shared lodgings, tenement barracks or religious institutions. The shift in female labour patterns due to industrialisation led to an increase in women working in cities. This gave rise to the concept of the 'surplus woman'—a single, working woman viewed as both a modern paradox and an undesired societal phenomenon. The housing issue, exacerbated by economic inequality and limited opportunities for ownership, prompted the development of alternative residential typologies. The paper explores the architectural characteristics and social implications of women's housing colonies in Switzerland, Germany, and the United Kingdom from the late 19th century to the 1930s through a comparative analysis of case studies. It argues that these residences played a pivotal role in advancing women's emancipation by offering spaces for visibility and autonomy, while also reflecting broader tensions between reform, respectability, and control. Revisiting these housing models further contributes to current debates on single households, gender and urban planning.

Keywords: housing, single women, housing typologies, gendered spaces, common spaces

In 1910 social reformer Mary Higgs published 'Where Shall She Live? The Homelessness of the Woman Worker', a study that highlighted the absence of adequate housing options for single working women. By foregrounding the material challenges of everyday life, Higgs engaged with the broader contemporary discourse surrounding women's housing conditions. To fully grasp the link between housing debates and the emergence of working women in the cities, it is crucial to examine the transformation in women's lives across Europe during the late 19th century.

This period witnessed a significant shift in female labour patterns as industrialisation created new employment opportunities in cities, particularly in domestic service, textile industries (Anderson & Zinsser, 1993, p. 299) and clerking positions (Schaser, 2020, p. 86). As urban middle-class households expanded, demand grew significantly for maids, which led to increased migration from the countryside to the city. For instance, around 1890, approximately one-third of Danish women worked outside the home, half of whom were employed in domestic service (Anderson & Zinsser, 1993, p. 299). But in contrast to the fact, that women were part of the workforce, societal norms discouraged married women from employment, as working was deemed incompatible

with motherhood and domestic duties. Consequently, many employed women were unmarried or childless (Terlinden & Von Oertzen, 2006, p. 187). In Germany, for instance, regulations such as the *Beamtinnenzölibat* enforced celibacy for female civil servants, reinforcing the association between working women and singleness (Frevert, 1989). In the United Kingdom under the legal principle of coverture, a woman's independent legal identity was effectively erased upon marriage (Morrell, 1999). This policy also framed female employment as a temporary condition, as women were expected to marry, start a family, and consequently leave the workforce.

But where could a single woman live in the city? The housing options of the time were either for families or tenement barracks for workers. As more and more women from the middle class entered the urban workforce, the lack of suitable housing became an increasingly urgent issue. In the German Newspaper *Die Gleichheit*, we read an article from 1911: "In many large cities, the housing shortage is particularly noticeable for single women. A girl who is dependent on her own labour and cannot live with her parents often finds it extremely difficult to find a suitable flat. The girl searches and searches, usually in vain, and wastes a lot of time. How often is the door slammed in her face with the words 'We don't rent to ladies.'"¹ (1911, p. 14).

In addition to the limited access to housing came the economic disadvantage for unmarried women: Anderson and Zinsser show in their work 'A history of their own – Women in Europe' with numbers from the UK and France that women earned around one-third up to half what men earned doing the same job (1993, pp. 300-312). Therefore, the housing options available to men were often neither affordable nor socially acceptable for women, leaving single women with very few choices. While the feminist movement was a catalyst in raising awareness of the issue, solutions emerged from a range of actors—including charitable organisations, social reformers and middle-class groups concerned with morality and respectability. A distinct residential typology designed specifically for single women began to appear across urban centres in Europe and the United States (Sassin, 2012). Known by different names—*Ledigenheime* in Germany, *Frauenwohnkolonien* or *Madonnenhaus* in Switzerland, and women's hostels in the UK—these residences began to proliferate from the late 19th century through the 1930s, with some continuations into the post-war period. While they emerged in different contexts and were driven by varying motives, they all aimed to address the growing need for suitable housing for the 'New Woman'².

This article explores the architectural characteristics and social impact of women's residences in urban centres in Switzerland, Germany, and the United Kingdom between 1900 and the 1930s. It investigates how these spaces reflected social changes affecting single, working women in early 20th-century Europe, and considers the role architecture played as an expression of social reform.

Women's housing colonies are examined not only as responses to the housing crisis, but as critical spaces for visibility, autonomy, and emancipation. In the late nineteenth century, the term "colony" became increasingly common in housing debates, and newspapers of the period likewise described women's housing projects as colonies, mirroring its broader use for reform-oriented, purpose-built residential communities. These residences played a pivotal role in advancing women's rights by offering single women—often marginalised and stigmatised—physical spaces for independence, thereby challenging traditional gender norms and contributing to the broader feminist movement.

The discussion centres on several key questions: What were the architectural characteristics of this new housing typology? What social and economic factors drove its development across various European cities? In what ways did these colonies contribute to women's emancipation? How did they incorporate architectural and social innovation? And how can these spaces be interpreted as architectural expressions of feminist theories on space and identity?

The study investigates three critical dimensions of women's housing colonies: their role in fostering female independence, their architectural distinctiveness, and their significance as responses to the challenges of modernity. Drawing on three case studies, it demonstrates how architectural design was closely tied to social reform and explores how these spaces functioned as platforms for emancipation and identity formation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative analysis focusing on three women's housing colonies in urban centres across Switzerland, Germany, and the United Kingdom. It examines the Ada Lewis Women's Lodging House in London by Joseph and Smithem (1913), the *Lettenhof* in Zurich by Lux Guyer (1927), and the *Ledigenheim* designed by Hans Scharoun for the *Werkbundaussstellung* in Stuttgart (1929). Each case study is examined in terms of its architectural features—such as room size, shared kitchens, common areas and communal facilities.

¹ Translated from German into English by the author, this applies to all translations unless otherwise noted.

² 'New Woman' describing the growing number of educated and working women (mostly white middle-class women). Term first used in an article by Sarah Grand (1854-1943) in 1894.

The case studies are deliberately selected for their urban context and for their relevance to the early twentieth-century debate on women's housing, allowing for a comparative analysis of purpose-built colonies for single women during a period of profound urbanisation and social change. However, women's housing initiatives were more diverse in scope. One of the early examples, the Blumhardt-Haus in Stuttgart (1874), established by the *Verein zur Fürsorge für Fabrikarbeiterinnen*, offered accommodation for more than one hundred factory workers (Evangelische Wohnheime Stuttgart e.V. (n.d.)). Around 1900, *Mädchenheime* in textile regions provided supervised housing in smaller industrial towns (Sassin, 2012). At the other end of the social spectrum, the Haus zur Sonne in Berlin (1913), designed by architect Emilie Winkelmann, catered to educated middle-class women who had withdrawn from working life (Terlinden & Von Oertzen, 2006). Also considering the timeframe we find later examples into the post-war decades, as shown for example by the *Frauenwohnheim Viktoriastrasse* (1954) or the *Wohnheim Monbijou* (1957) in Bern (Müller, 2024). Taken together, such examples illustrate the broader range of emerging housing models for women across different times, places and social classes. Against this background, the following analysis concentrates on three representative urban projects, examining not only their architectural features but also their socio-political significance. Beyond physical design, the analysis situates these buildings within their social and historical contexts, emphasising their roles in enhancing women's visibility, autonomy and access to urban life. Alongside architectural plans, the research draws on historical sources including newspaper articles, archival documents, and publications from the women's movement to reveal the lived experiences and challenges faced by single women during this period.

Furthermore, literature on feminist spatial theory, housing history and social movements is used to critically assess the significance of these housing colonies as a form of societal and architectural innovation.

The relationship between gender and space has been extensively theorised by feminist scholars. Dolores Hayden (1981) explores how urban planning historically marginalised women, while Doreen Massey (1994) highlights how space is not neutral but socially constructed, reinforcing power dynamics. Applying these perspectives, the analysis demonstrates how women's residences challenged existing spatial norms by creating environments that supported economic independence and communal living.

THE “SURPLUS WOMAN” AND THE RISE OF WOMEN’S HOUSING SOLUTION

By the end of the 19th century, both the number of working women and the number of single women were widely perceived to be increasing. Although this perception cannot be supported by clear demographic evidence (Dollard, 2009), it reflected a significant shift in societal views regarding women's roles in the public sphere. While the overall number of working women did not increase substantially, the nature of their employment changed considerably. Industrialisation and economic transformations facilitated the entry of more women into white-collar professions. For instance, in England in 1851 merely 1 percent of clerks were women. By 1914, 25 per cent of all commercial clerks were women. In forty years, the number of female clerks increased 400 times (Tilly & Scott, 1987, p. 156). This shift in profession meant a displacement from the traditional domestic realm into a priorly male-dominated world. Moreover, the entry of middle-class women into the workforce often contributed to the mistaken perception of an increase in the number of working women, as their experience was equated with all women (Tilly & Scott, 1987, p. 150). The rise of middle-class women in employment brought up moral and respectability concerns. Unmarried aunts and daughters were no longer financially sustainable, yet it was still seen as disgraceful in urban middle-class society for them to work outside the home. The idea of women earning money was viewed as harmful to the family's reputation (Dollard, 2009, p. 9). The growing presence of single women living independently gave rise to the concept of ‘surplus women’³, a societal notion labelling unmarried women as ‘extra’ or unnecessary (Dollard, 2009). As Sassin (2012, p. 201) notes: “The single person was by default a man, and yet the unmarried woman (*alleinstehende Frau*) was a popular signifier of modernity – at once a victim and a heroine of the modern age – one literally ‘standing alone’ (*alleinstehend*) in society through no fault of her own.” This highlights the contradictory position of unmarried women at the time: on the one hand, their status as working women was regarded as unnatural and temporary; on the other, the ‘New Woman’ was celebrated as a symbol of modernity and as a feminist ideal. Or how Massey puts it: “The old patriarchal form of domestic production was torn apart, the established pattern of relations between the sexes was thrown into question.” (Massey, 1994, p. 191).

The way in which one lives - both how and where - is often a reflection of one's economic and social status (Müller, 2024, p. 22). Until the 20th century, women predominantly lived within family structures, whether in nuclear or extended households. If women lived outside the family, they typically did so as domestic servants,

³ The term originated in the United Kingdom following the 1851 census, which reported a significant demographic imbalance with close to one million more women than men. It continued to circulate in public discourse after the First World War, when wartime casualties further intensified concerns about unmarried women. In German-speaking contexts, related discussions referred to a *Frauenüberschuss* (surplus of women).

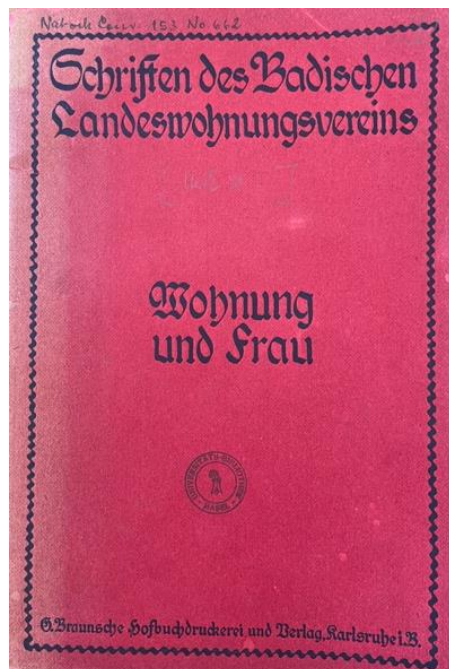
residing with the families they worked for, or as what was called *Schlafgängerinnen* ('sleepwalkers') in Germany, renting a bed on a day-to-day basis in small flats of low-income people (Müller, 2024, p. 22). Others lived in rental barracks and lower middle-class workers might have been able to locate a room in an overcrowded boarding house. For middle-class or upper-class women there were furnished rooms or very rarely independent accommodations (Henderson, 2009, p. 359).

Before, for unmarried women one of the few 'respectable' housing options available was often found in cloisters or other charitable, religious foundations. However, while these institutions provided shelter, they were governed by strict rules and increasingly regarded—across a broad political spectrum, from moderates to leftist radicals—as outdated and regressive. Moreover, having traditionally catered to elderly women, these institutions were seen as ill-suited for young, modern women seeking to actively engage in society (Sassin, 2012, p. 206).

This lack of suitable housing options was addressed by the feminist movement early on. Louise Otto-Peters (1818–1895), a founding member of the General German Women's Association (*Allgemeiner Deutscher Frauenverein*), addressed this issue as early as in 1881. In her article *Klein, rein und allein* ('small, clean, and alone'), published in the journal *Neue Bahnen*, she asserted that women no longer wished to live in subordination with relatives but instead sought space of their own: "(...) they will all be happy to affirm the above⁴ and find comfort in the fact that they are free to do as they please within their own four walls!" (Otto-Peters, 1881, p. 18). Further, the 1911 conference organised by the German *Badische Landeswohnungsverein*, titled 'Apartment and woman' (Figure 1), articulated the housing crisis as a gendered issue: "The solution to the housing question, this important and urgent social issue of the present day, has an even deeper significance for women than it does for men." (Baum, Kröhne, et al., 1911, p. 40). The conference also underscored the broader issue of the housing shortage for single individuals: "The housing shortage that the building cooperatives set out to remedy is first and foremost the lack of good, healthy and affordable small flats." (Staudinger, 1911, pp. 44-45). Similar concerns arose across Europe. In 1910, Mary Higgs, in collaboration with Edward Hayward, published 'Where Shall She Live? The Homelessness of the Woman Worker', highlighting the housing challenges faced by women workers in London, as mentioned in the beginning.

Figure 1

Conference Booklet "Apartment and woman" 1911



The housing conditions of single working-class women differed significantly from both their married counterparts and single women of higher social standing. Overcrowding, large families, and financial hardship meant that many working-class girls had to leave home at a young age to support themselves. A large number entered live-in occupations such as domestic service, dressmaking, or retail work, which inherently denied them independent housing. Those employed in other fields often secured lodging on their own, but their low wages

⁴ Here 'above' refers to 'small, clean, and alone', which the author describes as fitting keywords for single women, "i.e. those who have no families in which they can make themselves useful, whether their own or one in which they fulfill some kind of professional role."

typically restricted them to the most impoverished housing options. The extreme poverty faced by unmarried, widowed, or abandoned working-class women left them highly susceptible to homelessness, with many forced into workhouses. Historical records indicate that thousands of women also lived in common lodging houses, shelters, brothels, or were left without shelter altogether (Morrell, 1999). This shows that women were by no means a uniform or homogeneous group; the housing conditions of working-class women differed significantly from those of middle- and upper-class women, just as the experiences of single women contrasted with those of married women. However, certain societal factors transcended class and marital status, shaping women's housing circumstances in distinctly gendered ways—primarily due to their economic and social dependence on men.

The struggles single women faced in securing housing reflect broader gendered division of space theorised by feminist scholars. Hayden (1981) describes how the spatial organisation of cities has often reinforced women's economic and social subordination. Similarly, Chant and McIlwaine (1998) argue, women's access to urban space has historically been shaped by their perceived dependency on male providers. The exclusion of single women from the urban rental market thus underscores their precarious position within a built environment designed around patriarchal family structures.

In summary, the increasing number of independent working women in cities—particularly the rise of middle-class women entering the workforce—combined with economic disadvantages and a lack of suitable housing options, made the housing issue a critical concern for women. Therefore, solutions were sought from various sides. On one hand, the bourgeoisie aimed to provide morally safe spaces for working women in the cities, spaces that aligned with traditional values of the 'home', hence avoiding an institutional character. On the other hand, the feminist movement advocated for greater independence for women, seeking to free them from the constraints of family structures and assigned gender roles. This combination of influences led to the development of housing models that strived to balance respectability and independence, offering women spaces that allowed them to live autonomously while still conforming to certain social expectations.

FROM HOUSING CRISIS TO ARCHITECTURAL INNOVATION

Pioneering models

One of the earliest examples of this new typology can be found in Stuttgart: a *Ledigenheim* built in 1874 for skilled female factory workers by the Association of Care for Female Factory Workers. The project's supporters aimed to create a hygienic and morally safe environment while fostering a sense of community. Notable features of this early project include bathroom facilities on each floor, brightly lit bedrooms and well-designed communal spaces, such as a heated gathering hall and two public kitchens (Sassin, 2012, p. 215). Another early example is Sloane Gardens House (Figure 2), built in 1888 for the Ladies' Associated Dwellings Company in London. It primarily consisted of compact single bedrooms and cubicles. The ground floor housed shops, some of which sold products made by the residents. Additionally, the serviced building featured a library, a music room, and a communal dining hall (Gee, 2010, p. 92).

Figure 2

Sloane gardens house 1888. © Geoff Brandwood, Victorian Society



Later housing models still featured many components of earlier housing experiments but presented a classier appearance. The *Ledigenheim* in Alt Moabit Berlin from 1909 for example was in the style of the Biedermeier revival, a style that could be read as both “elevated and homey” (Sassin, 2012, p. 218) (Figure 3). The house

included a dining hall, as well as a coffee house, that was open to the public. A 'homey' atmosphere should on one hand serve the purportedly innate domestic nature of women and on the other hand ensure, that the residents would rather stay at home than indulge in the city life (Sassin, 2012, p. 225).

Figure 3

Alt Moabit 38 (1909), primary facade. 2008. ©Erin Eckbold Sassin



An examination of early housing models designed specifically for single women reveals several defining features of this purpose-built typology. These residences consistently incorporated public and semi-public facilities. Ground floors often housed amenities such as restaurants or libraries, making them accessible to both residents and the wider community. In the private sections, bedrooms were frequently complemented by parlours—semi-public spaces where residents could receive guests without having to invite them into their personal rooms (Sassin, 2012, p. 224). One objective was to ensure that residents stayed within the confines of the building, thus limiting their exposure to potentially morally dubious establishments in the city. Additionally, these housing complexes aimed to free the working women from the domestic chores by providing in-house dining options and communal services.

The construction of *Ledigenheime* was part of a broader international trend of social experiments, which were underpinned by new educational opportunities (Terlinden, 1999). Emerging in the late 19th century, single-kitchen houses (*Einküchenhäuser*), rooted in socialist ideas proposed by Charles Fourier (1772–1837), served as important precursor models influencing the later design of *Ledigenheime*. These early experiments advocated the centralisation of domestic labour to ease household responsibilities.

Within the context of the *Ledigenheime* single women played a leading role. With their perceived innate maternal qualities, women were seen as capable of making a unique cultural contribution to a public sphere that had traditionally been dominated by men and male values. This idea of an expanded form of motherhood—spiritual rather than biological—found expression in what scholars refer to as 'municipal housekeeping'. This concept encompassed various initiatives, such as the establishment of settlement houses, free kindergartens, public kitchens, and public libraries, often driven by philanthropic voluntary organisations. Public kitchens and libraries, in particular, were frequently central to the design of *Ledigenheime* (Sassin, 2012, p. 209). These buildings thus reflected an architectural embodiment of traditional gender ideologies, allowing women to enter the public sphere while fulfilling roles that aligned with their supposed natural duties as caretakers of the home.

Having outlined the origins and underlying principles of this building typology, the following section turns to three in-depth case studies to examine its architectural features and social significance in the early 20th century. Each case will explore with particular attention to its inception the key actors involved in its realisation. Through comparative analysis, the section highlights both the formal characteristics of the designs and their broader impact within the social and cultural contexts in which they emerged.

TRACING THE ORIGINS AND DRIVING FORCES OF WOMEN'S RESIDENTIAL REFORM

One of the driving forces behind early 20th-century efforts to reform the housing market for single women in the United Kingdom was the National Association of Women's Lodging Houses. Established in 1909 by Mary Higgs, it focused primarily on those in the lower-income sectors (Morrell, 1999, p. 293). It played a pivotal role in advancing the housing agenda for single women. However, while the organisation excelled in gathering and disseminating information and fostering collaboration among stakeholders, it struggled to convince municipalities to create lodging houses for women. It still managed to play an important role in opening several

women's hostels. The association's most notable achievement was its dedicated focus on the housing needs of single women, going beyond the scope of other organisations and successfully elevating the issue to national importance.

Furthermore, the organisation directed its efforts towards all women in need, without distinguishing between those deemed 'respectable' and 'unrespectable'. This marked a significant shift in the perception of women's housing needs, reflecting a broader transition from moralistic interpretations of poverty to an understanding rooted in economic factors. At the time, vagrancy and homelessness had become pressing public concerns, prompting discussions about new solutions. The emergence of a 'social services state' under the Liberal government signalled a move towards recognising the provision of basic social needs as a governmental responsibility rather than solely the domain of private charity (Morrell, 1999, p. 324). A notable example of their efforts is the Ada Lewis Women's Lodging House, constructed in 1913. After unsuccessful attempts to secure funding from the municipality, a private fund from the wealthy Ada Lewis-Hill was used to build what became the largest women's lodging house in London at the time, accommodating up to 220 women (Gee, 2010, p. 104). The architectural partnership of Joseph and Smithem, about whom limited information is available except that they had previously designed several workmen's housing projects in Dublin, were commissioned with the Ada Lewis House. Today the house is known as the Discroll House, since it was purchased by Terence Discroll in 1965.

In contrast to the Ada Lewis Women's Lodging House, the women's colony *Lettenhof* in Zurich was not funded by a single benefactor, but by a collective union of individuals sharing common interests and goals. In March 1925, the Women's Centre (*Frauenzentrale*) commissioned studies to explore building projects for single women, as well as the identification of suitable building sites. This sparked the interest of other women's organisations, leading to the merger of three associations and the formation of a cooperative to undertake the implementation of a related project. The Women's Center (*Frauenzentrale*), the protectoral for single women (*Protektorat alleinstehender Frauen*) and the building cooperative for working women (*Baugenossenschaft berufstätiger Frauen* (see [Figure 4](#), Statues of the cooperative⁵)) were able to purchase a larger site in Wipkingen, a quarter in Zurich that was primarily characterised by agriculture until the 1920s (Bürliemann, 2019). The land was collectively purchased, but to accommodate the diverse needs of the future residents and the various interest groups they represented, each group independently financed their own portion of the housing complex. The municipality of Zurich also provided financial assistance to the *Genossenschaften* (cooperatives), while future residents were required to purchase share certificates ranging from 600 to 1800 francs, depending on the size of the room or flat they applied for. This process, which is a distinctive feature of Swiss cooperatives, was commonly used to facilitate affordable housing. One of the earliest examples of such engagement was the women's housing cooperative founded in Zurich in 1919 by Dora Staudinger and others. As a pioneer of the cooperative movement in Switzerland, Staudinger viewed collective housing not only as a response to economic need but also as a tool for self-help and social renewal—values that would go on to shape later projects like the *Lettenhof* (Müller, 2023).

With the *Zürcher Frauenverein für alkoholfreie Wirtschaften* (Zurich women's association for alcohol-free pubs) a fourth player was involved in the project, which led to four buildings grouped around a courtyard ([Figure 5](#)). Although each building was financed individually and has partially a different interior layout, the exterior design was conceived as an overall complex, including a shared garden area (Rudolf, 1928, p. 145). Lux Guyer was an obvious choice to be commissioned with the design of the colony, as she was the first female architect in Switzerland to establish her own architectural practice.

The *Ledigenheim* designed by Hans Sharoun and completed in 1929 as part of the *Werkbundsiedlung* for the *Wohnung und Werkraum* exhibition in Breslau has yet another background and differs programmatically from the previous two examples. It not only provided housing options for single women but also for single men as well as childless couples. The *Werkbundsiedlung* in Breslau was a significant architectural and urban planning project that was part of the broader *Deutscher Werkbund* movement, which aimed to merge industrial efficiency with high-quality design. In contrast to the renowned *Werkbund* exhibition in Stuttgart in 1927, which had a broader international focus, the Breslau exhibition emphasised community-oriented buildings and featured more local architects rather than globally recognised figures. The funding for the exhibition came from the municipality and small and micro flats were the focus of the exhibition (Bock, 2022, p. 114).

⁵ Art. 2 states: «The purpose of the co-operative is to provide healthy and affordable housing and to rent it out to members, primarily to single working women. The cooperative is a non-profit organisation and is politically and confessionally neutral.»

Figure 4

Statutes cooperative working women Zurich, (SozArch KS 334/15-Z1), Sozialarchiv⁵

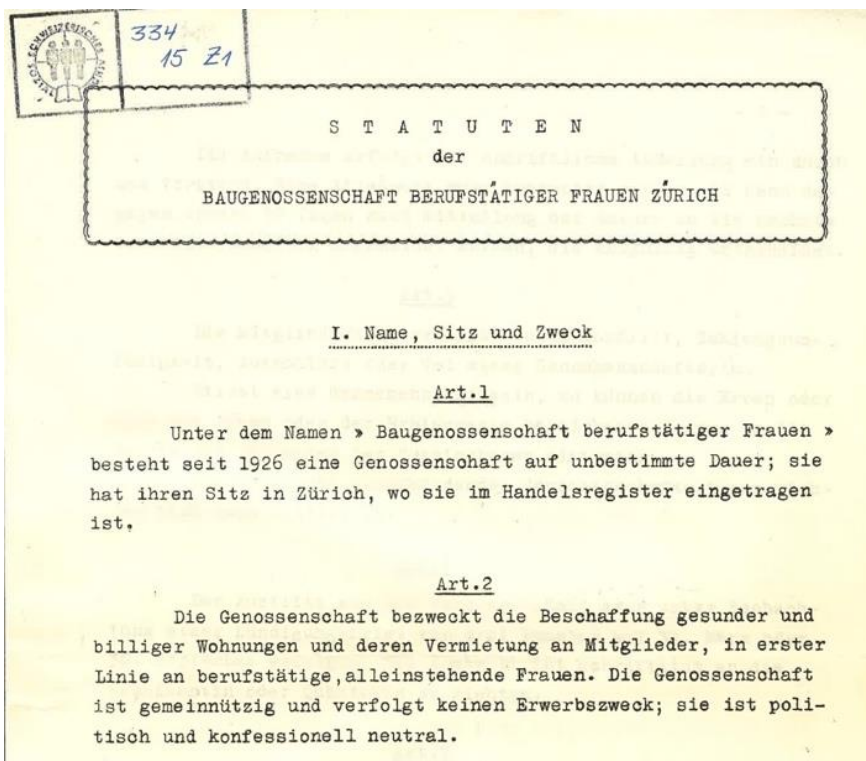


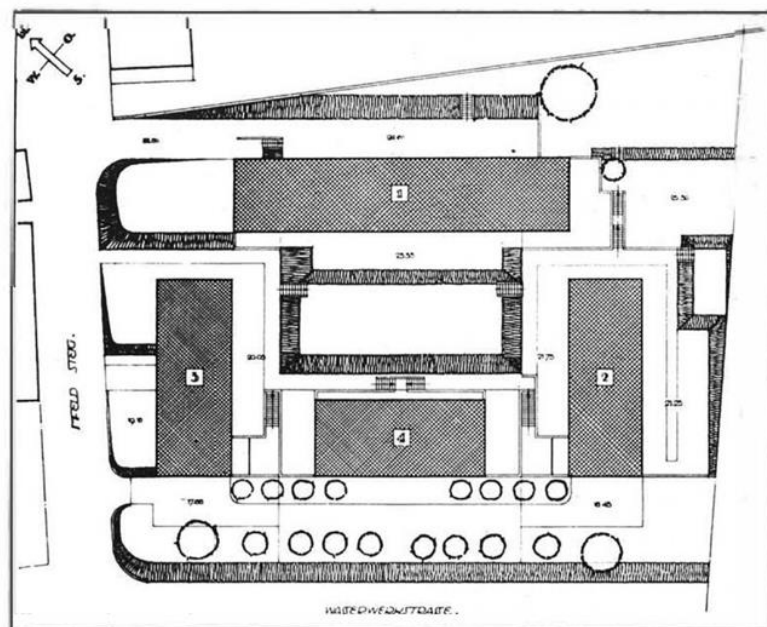
Figure 5

Situation Lettenhof with the different stakeholders, 1927. Published in "Wohnkolonie für alleinstehende Frauen im Lettenhof Zürich." *Das Werk: Kunst und Architektur* 15(5), 1928

LETTENHOF

Lageplan Maßstab 1:600

1. Baugenossenschaft Lettenhof
2. Baugenossenschaft berufstätiger Frauen
3. Protektorat für alleinstehende Frauen
4. Alkoholfreies Restaurant



It highlighted the shift towards rationalist and functional architecture, moving away from traditional ornamentation and promoting a more efficient, standardised approach to residential design (Figure 6). While not exclusively designed for single women, it resonates with the housing models developed by the early feminist movement in Germany, which brought the issue of housing for single individuals—particularly women—into the forefront of the housing discourse and developed community-based housing blocks.

Figure 6

View of the courtyard with the two-bedroom flats on the left and the dining hall in the middle, 1929. © bkp, Berlin, 2003, Kunstbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz



In summary we have one project brought to life by a women's organisation and financed by a female philanthropist, another executed through the merger of three women's cooperatives with the support of the municipality for charitable housing, and a third showcased at an exhibition of housing models, which highlighted how small and micro-flats, designed to accommodate the emerging "urban nomad" (Sassin, 2012, p. 248), which were at the forefront of the housing debate at the time.

Architectural innovations in women's collective housing

The Ada Lewis Women's Lodging is a six-story building designed in a Baroque style with a distinctive U-shaped floor plan (Figure 7). Its façade is marked by large, generously proportioned windows, which offer no indication of the compact cubicles behind them. The entrance is accentuated by a triangular pediment in the style of a 'tympañum', while the semi-circular steps create an inviting gesture toward the public.

Emily Gee, in her chapter "Where Shall She Live? Housing the New Working Woman in Late Victorian and Edwardian London", describes the building's architectural approach: "This historicist style conferred a sense of authority that fitted its semi-institutional use, yet the rich detailing produced a proud building to suit the women it housed." (Gee, 2010, p. 105).

The first four floors were dedicated to sleeping accommodations, comprising "214 single cubicles, twenty double bedrooms, and six slightly larger 'special' rooms" (Gee, 2010, p. 105). Architects Joseph and Smith employed an innovative material of the time—Mouchel-Hennebique ferro-concrete—in the columns and in other structurally significant elements. While these features imparted a sense of solidity and functionality, the common rooms contrasted with a more decorative aesthetic. They were adorned with colourful glazed tiles, featuring niches and fireplaces (Figure 8). The house offered a variety of shared spaces, including a sewing room, a clothes-brushing room, laundry and drying rooms. Amenities designed to support domestic labour were primarily located in the basement, while the sewing room, library, and dining rooms were situated on the ground floor (Historic England, n.d.). The special bedrooms were consistently occupied, while the cubicles attracted fewer residents. This discrepancy arose because, although the hostel was intended for the 'poorest' women, they were primarily occupied by teachers, typists, clerks, and nurses, rather than factory workers. As a result, just four months after opening, a small adjustment was made to increase the privacy of the cubicles.

Figure 7

Ada Lewis women's lodging house (Driscoll house) by Stephen Craven, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0



Figure 8

Library at Ada Lewis Women's Lodging House. ©Historical England DP0217



Emily Gee also writes about the Ada Lewis House, that it was “clearly modelled on the men’s Rowton Houses (...). Ada Lewis House was more inviting and ‘feminine’ in some of its decorative schemes (...) but the glazed tile dados (...) were eerily similar.” (Gee, 2010, p. 106).

In general, we see a lot of similar features to lodgings that were solely built for men. But some interesting distinctions can be determined, such as the above mentioned ‘feminine’ decorations. Other distinctions were the interior connection between the private spaces and the public. *Ledigenheime* for men emerged within municipal and philanthropic reform efforts aimed at stabilising the everyday lives of single male workers, who were considered particularly vulnerable to moral dangers and unruly behaviour in the modern city (e.g. Rehloffstraße Hamburg, 1913, *Ledigenheim* München, 1926). These concerns shaped the architecture: In the *Ledigenheime* at Dankelmannstrasse (Berlin, 1908), for instance, there was no direct access from private or semi-private spaces to the public areas of the home. This deliberate separation of single men’s interactions with public spaces reflects the concerns of middle-class reformers, who feared that, residents had not yet fully adapted to domestic life and could not be entirely trusted to conform to expected behaviour. Whereas women, seen as naturally inclined to domesticity, were considered less of a concern (Sassin, 2012, p. 221).

In contrast to the small cubicles at the Ada Lewis House, the Lettenhof in Zurich offered more two- (23) to three-room (6) flats, rather than single rooms (22) (Zamariàn, 2013, p. 180). This was a deliberate choice by the cooperative, aimed at accommodating women with varying needs in terms of room sizes and, consequently, rental prices. Nevertheless, we find similar professions represented among the residents: Dressmaker, telephonist, office clerk, commercial clerk, childminder, kindergarten teacher or teacher (Bürlimann, 2019).

The façade, similar to that of the Ada Lewis House, featured large windows, including double-wing balcony doors. However, it embraced a distinct modernist style, marked by the absence of ornamentation and historical references (Figure 9).

Figure 9

The Lettenhof view from the river 1927. Bangeschichtliches Archiv Stadt Zürich



The *Lettenhof* offered a range of apartment types, each with furnishing and layouts tailored to residents’ differing needs and financial means. The largest units—two- and three-room flats located in the main housing blocks—featured generously sized rooms, private bathrooms, full kitchens, and balconies. In contrast, the more affordable two-room flats situated in the flanking wings were equipped with compact kitchenettes and either private or shared bathroom facilities. A third category consisted of ten single rooms located in the fourth building, which also housed the alcohol-free restaurant. These single units included bed alcoves, running water, either a balcony or bay window, shared bathrooms, and small kitchenettes (Rudolf, 1928).

Overall, the housing colony was considered highly innovative for its time. Modern conveniences such as electric boilers, telephones in each building (at a time when only three other telephone connections existed in the entire neighbourhood), and vacuum cleaners available for borrowing from the caretaker couple reflected a forward-looking approach to everyday domestic life.

As one contemporary newspaper observed: “At every turn, the layout and utilisation of the rooms reveal the architect’s understanding of the needs of a woman’s household, which has to be managed as efficiently as possible in terms of time and energy alongside her job” (M.L.Sch., 1927).

By comparison, the Ada Lewis House placed greater emphasis on communal areas rather than individual living spaces. Nevertheless, the restaurant in the *Lettenhof* provided a space for residents to gather or order meals to be delivered to their rooms. This feature was significant in fostering social interaction and communication, not only among residents but also with those from the surrounding neighbourhood. At the time, it was considered immoral for women to dine alone in a public restaurant, making this provision a crucial aspect of the colony (Schmid et al., 2019).

“Zurich can pride itself on being the first Swiss city to fulfil an urgent need of our time: The creation of small flats for single and especially working women.”, celebrated a local newspaper (M.L.Sch, 1927). As international developments and debates in Switzerland are rather slow to be reflected in the built environment, the residential colony was praised by various newspapers and magazines. Hans Scharoun's *Ledigenheim* had a somewhat more difficult task. The housing block for single individuals was built for the *Werkbund* exhibition ‘*Wohnung und Werkraum*’ in Breslau in 1929. Only two years prior to that, the famous *Werkbund* exhibition ‘the apartment’ took place in Stuttgart under the artistic leadership of Mies van der Rohe. Interestingly, the architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, who designed a model flat for working women as part of the Stuttgart exhibition, advocated against clustering women in segregated residential blocks. Instead, she promoted the integration of single women’s housing into larger, mixed-family residential developments. Based on her own experiences and commissioned research in Frankfurt, Lihotzky developed the concept of the *Einliegerwohnung*—independent, affordable studio units embedded within regular housing settlements. She argued that integrating single women into family-oriented housing would not only reduce social isolation but also allow the units to benefit from public subsidies otherwise unavailable to women-specific housing blocks (Henderson, 2009, pp. 360–361).

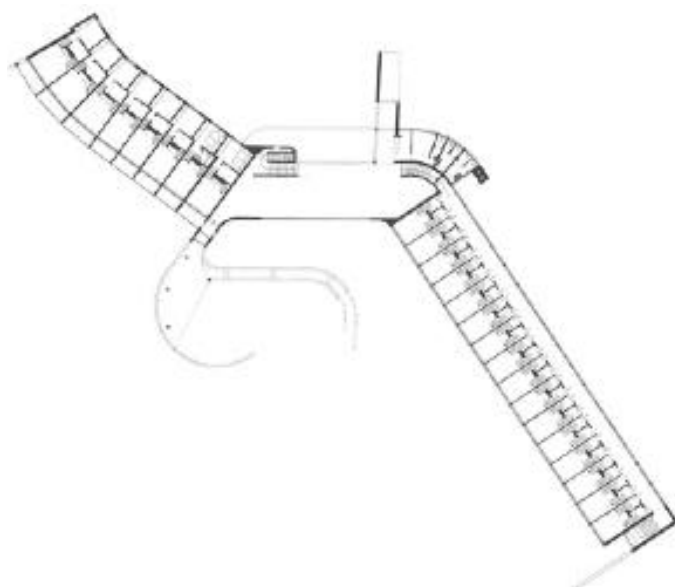
It can be assumed that a lot of pressure was on the architects of the ‘*Wohnung und Werkraum*’ expo not to repeat the Stuttgart contents and go beyond what was displayed there (Eisen, 2012, p. 225). Compared to the other case-studies we have here an experimental settlement, though built to overdue the time of the exhibition, but certainly with a model character. Opposed to Ada Lewis Women’s Lodging House the *Ledigenheim* designed by Hans Scharoun was not intended to accommodate the ‘simple’ working girl but rather targeted the ‘New People’ of the interwar period. For this audience, more complex facilities were presented, much like the comforts a hotel had to offer (Eisen, 2012, p. 227). Scharoun himself talks about a metropolitan dweller, who differs from the small town or middle town dwellers, referring to the above mentioned ‘urban nomad’. In the reception of the exhibition, we can see that Scharoun’s building was the most noted and hence it can be said that he truly accomplished to add to the housing debate of the *Werkbundsiedlung* in Stuttgart. Eisen, for example writes about this: “It was the first *Ledigenheim* of modern genealogy to be built, which differed fundamentally from its predecessors in terms of its promised social function and clientele.” (Eisen, 2012, p. 229). It seems that from now on, working single people were at the forefront of the modernisation of living environments and lifestyles and that their new domicile communicated this change.

The building's form and layout reflect Scharoun's vision of modern housing, combining efficiency with a strong emphasis on social interaction and spatial fluidity.

One of the most striking features of the *Ledigenheim* is its S-shaped layout, which integrates different residential wings with communal spaces (Figure 10). This organic form not only responds to the site’s topography but also creates a dynamic interaction between private and shared areas. Additionally, the building was divided into separate sections to accommodate different demographics: one part was designated for female residents, while another was exclusively for men, and a third for couples. This separation reflected societal norms of the time, preserving the overall communal concept while innovatively combining different groups within a single residence.

Figure 10

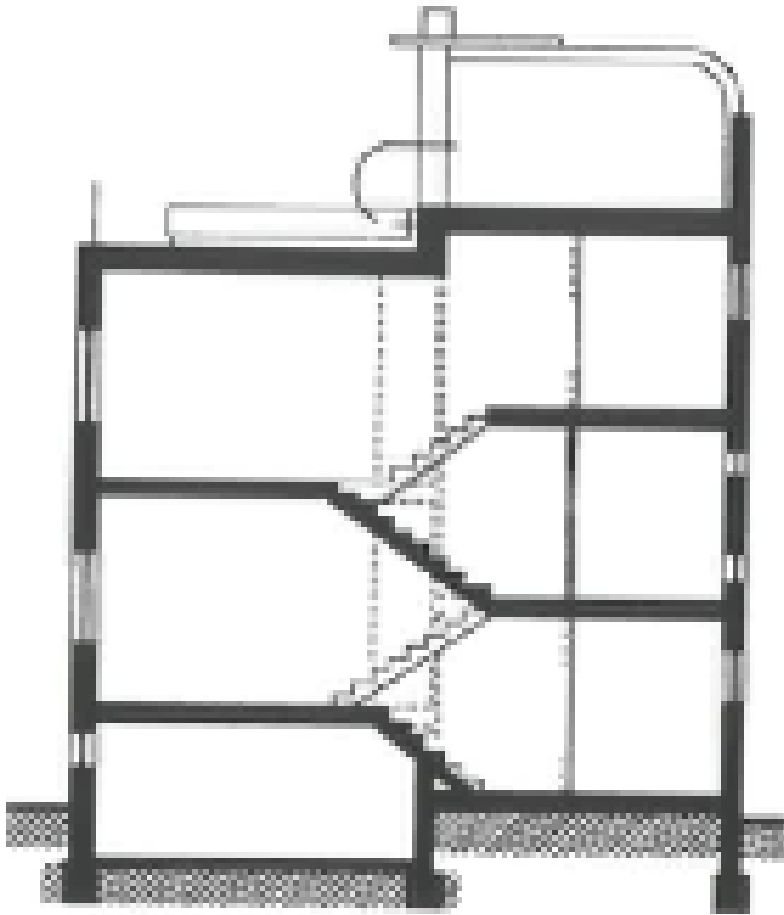
Floorplan first floor, 1929. Akademie der Künste [AdK], Berlin, Hans-Scharoun-Archiv



The flats themselves are compact and efficiently organised. The single and double-occupancy units are designed with a semi-duplex arrangement, where each unit spans two half-levels. It was one of the first split-level building (Figure 11). This living on multiple floors was intended to give a sense of living in a house, and with this house-in-house principle Scharoun created a new social building type (Bock, 2022, p. 14).

Figure 11

Section, 1929. Akademie der Künste [AdK], Berlin, Hans-Scharoun-Archiv



A key architectural element of the *Ledigenheim* is its communal facilities. At the heart of the building is a large central hall, flanked by a restaurant and service areas, fostering a sense of community among residents. The lobby, terrace, and rooftop gardens further support Scharoun's vision of collective living by providing additional shared spaces where inhabitants can interact (Syring & Kirschenmann, 2004, p. 33).

The three case studies demonstrate various architectural innovations, both technical and in terms of spatial design. In the Ada Lewis House, drying rooms were introduced, which were “celebrated for drying a resident’s clothes within minutes of her coming in from the rain.” (Gee, 2010, p. 105). In *Lettenhof*, each kitchen was equipped with an electric boiler that provided hot water for both the kitchen and the bathrooms, alongside other modern amenities like electric washing machines, tumble dryers, telephones, and vacuum cleaners (Rudolf, 1928). Other innovations were found in the layout of the ground floors: Scharoun’s *Ledigenheim* featured an S-shaped layout that fostered communal living and social cohesion by integrating private flats with shared spaces, such as a central hall and restaurant. This design encouraged interaction among residents and reflected a progressive social approach by accommodating both single men and women, promoting equality while still respecting societal norms of the time. The split-level micro-flats in the *Ledigenheim* were one of the first examples of this housing arrangement, offering efficient use of space while creating a sense of independence within a collective environment (Eisen, 2012). In Lux Guyer’s *Lettenhof*, innovative features such as built-in cupboards and designated compartments for storing milk in the entrance area were introduced, optimising space and utility (Figure 12). Ada Lewis House, with its small cubicles, was compact and designed primarily for lower-income women, but the careful detailing of the common areas, such as the stairway with an iron balustrade that continued throughout the building, imbued the space with a sense of elegance. The centralisation of the household chores by providing communal dining room, sewing and clothes-brushing rooms presented a relief to the exhausting lives of the residents while fostering a sense of community (see Table 1 for comparison).

Figure 12

Floorplan second and third floors, 1927. Published in "Wohnkolonie für alleinstehende Frauen im Lettenhof Zürich." *Das Werk: Kunst und Architektur* 15(5), 1928

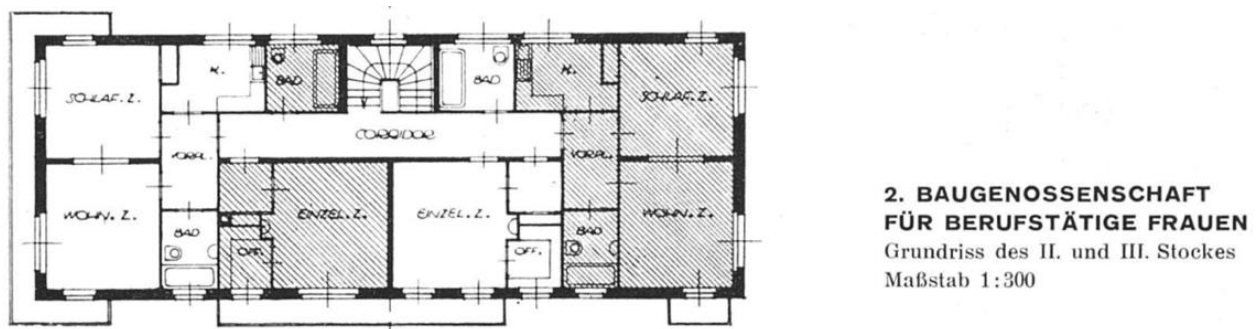


Table 1

Comparative overview of the key features across the three case studies

Feature	Ada Lewis Women's Lodging House, London (1913)	Lettenhof, Zurich (1927)	Ledigenheim, Breslau (1929)
Stakeholders	National Association of Women's Lodging Houses; funded by Ada Lewis-Hill (private philanthropist)	Cooperative of Women's Organisations (Women's Center, Protectoral for Single Women, Building Cooperative for Working Women, Zurich women's association for alcohol-free pubs), Municipality of Zurich	Municipality-funded Werkbund Exhibition, Deutscher Werkbund movement
Architect(s)	Joseph and Smithem	Lux Guyer	Hans Scharoun
Accommodation Type	Single-room cubicles, shared spaces	Mix of single rooms and small flats (two- and three-room units)	Small and micro-flats, split-level units
Size	214 single cubicles, 20 double rooms, 6 special rooms	22 single rooms, 23 two-room flats, 6 three-room flats	48 flats, 32 for single individuals, 16 for childless couples
Communal Facilities	Sewing room, laundry, drying rooms, library, dining room, foot baths, clothes-brushing room	Alcohol-free restaurant, shared gardens, communal facilities (telephones, vacuum cleaners, washing machines)	Central hall, restaurant, rooftop gardens, terrace
Design Style	Baroque, historical	Modernist, functionalist, minimal ornamentation	Rationalist, modernist, innovative organic S-shaped layout
Architectural Innovations	Ferro-concrete structural elements, efficient drying rooms, glazed tile interiors	Built-in furniture, compact kitchenettes, modern appliances, varied flat sizes, private balconies	Split-level flats, innovative S-shaped layout integrating private and public spaces
Economic Class & Occupation	Primarily lower-income professional women (teachers, clerks, nurses, typists)	Lower to middle-income professional women (dressmakers, telephonists, office clerks, teachers)	Mixed demographic: single working individuals, men and women, 'urban nomads'

The social impact of purpose-built housing for women

Housing is a fundamental human need, but it goes beyond the mere provision of shelter. It encompasses socio-spatial structures that shape how everyday life is organised and experienced (Reuschke, 2010, p. 7). For women, especially single women, the ability to inhabit space independently has long been tied to broader questions of respect, autonomy, and social participation. In her 1909 article *Goals of the Women's Movement*, Helene von Mülinen articulated this ambition clearly: "To show the single woman the same respect as the married woman—we are still quite a long way from this, despite some progress—to help her, as men are helped, to find a professional life that fulfils her, and to guide her intellectual life in directions where she learns to be a ruler according to her determination—that is the task and goal of the women's movement."

This ideal found expression in the built environment, particularly in women's housing models such as the so-called 'Madonna-Houses'. An early successful example is the York Street Chambers, built in 1892 by the Ladies' Residential Chambers Company Ltd. Its layout—comprising private bed-sitting rooms or flats paired with communal dining facilities—closely resembled the explored case studies. As Emily Gee notes, the first women

members of the RIBA, sisters Ethel and Bessie Charles, operated their architectural practice from this residence (Gee, 2010, p. 93). Hence, these spaces could foster not only independence but also professional networking and mutual support.

While these housing models were not always intended as overtly feminist interventions, scholars like Sassin have emphasised their emancipatory potential. They aligned with broader reforms in domestic labour, particularly the feminist push to liberate women from the burdens of housekeeping and enable fuller participation in public life. Lily Braun (1865 – 1916), for example, argued that access to education or politics was insufficient unless paired with infrastructural support—such as kitchen-less homes—that allowed women to step beyond the confines of domestic roles (Meyer, 1985). She was a German feminist, writer and social reformer, advocating for women's rights, particularly focusing on the intersections between social, economic, and political structures. Braun believed that the advancement of women's rights in education and politics was insufficient without addressing the infrastructure that supported women's domestic roles.

In this light, *Ledigenheime* can be seen as direct architectural responses to feminist demands for independence and social integration and as a further development, or rather specialisation, of the precursor models of one-kitchen housing models. As Sassin notes: “Simply by enabling women to live ‘on their own’ in a setting that was a combination of the public and private realms, but without the requirements of running a typical household (...) *Ledigenheime* were more progressive socially—even radical—than many of their (general progressive) supporters believed.” (Sassin, 2012, p. 239).

At the same time, these spaces often embodied a tension between emancipation and control. While they offered women privacy and autonomy, they frequently reinforced middle-class moral expectations. In Germany, many *Ledigenheime* appointed a director to oversee the residents' behaviour—someone “who would ensure ladylike behaviour” (Sassin, 2012, p. 210). Similarly, in Zurich's *Lettenhof*, a resident caretaker couple was responsible for maintaining order. Moreover, the architectural features themselves often reflected gendered assumptions. Residences for women typically included ‘teaching kitchens’ (as in Alt Moabit) or small individual kitchenettes in addition to communal dining areas (*Lettenhof*). In contrast, male-only residences never included private kitchens, revealing a persistent assumption that women—even when living independently and having the options of in-house dining—would still want to prepare meals for themselves. This distinction makes Hans Scharoun's *Ledigenheim* in Breslau particularly significant: no architectural differentiation was made between single male and female residents.

Houses for single women began to lose their prominence as a distinct typology in the 1930s. In Germany this was partly due to the rise of fascist ideologies, which reasserted traditional gender roles and cast women primarily as mothers within the nuclear family. At the same time, these residences came under critique from within modernist architectural discourse. Reform-minded architects such as Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky argued that separating single women into dedicated housing blocks was both socially isolating and architecturally outdated. Instead, they promoted the integration of single working women into larger, mixed-use residential developments, a model that aligned more closely with the ideals of the Neues Bauen movement (Henderson, 2009; Terlinden, 1999).

While post-war reconstruction produced various forms of accommodation for single people, such as personnel houses attached to hospitals, or compact apartments in large-scale housing projects like Alvar Aalto's high-rise in Bremen (1958–62) or the Berlin Hansa Quarter developed for the Interbau exhibition (1957), these cannot be seen as direct successors to the *Ledigenheim*. As Erin Eckhold Sassin concludes, “there were and are no duplicates for the *Ledigenheim* building type” (Sassin, 2012, p. 259). What disappeared was precisely the reformist ambition that had once driven women's residences: their collective kitchens, lounges, and gardens designed to foster new forms of sociability and support among women. Post-war solutions instead responded to the urgent need for small, private units, shifting the focus away from communal reform to standardised individual flats.

Berta Rahm's 1950 essay *Wohnmöglichkeiten für Alleinstehende* (living possibilities for singles) further underscores this point. Writing in the Swiss journal *Werk*, she observed the continuing lack of adequate housing for single women and noted that Switzerland lagged behind countries like Sweden, where the issue had gained greater attention. Her call for action shows that, even decades after the first wave of *Ledigenheime*, the housing question for single women remained unresolved and largely marginal in Central Europe. Rahm's perspective aligns with Sassin's assessment: while the typology left traces, particularly in the evolution of the modern single flat, it never secured a lasting foothold nor retained the explicitly social ambitions it once embodied.

From a feminist perspective, this trajectory is telling. What persisted after 1930 were fragmented or pragmatic responses to demographic and economic pressures rather than visionary projects aimed at transforming gendered relations through architecture. The *Ledigenheim* thus stands out as both a historical anomaly and a potential model: a building type that demonstrated, as Sassin puts it, that “(...) that it was once possible to

balance social control with social mobility and to skillfully and successfully move between progressive and conservative positions in the interest of maintaining, or even building, a civil society” (Sassin, 2012, p. 259).

CONCLUSION

This paper examined how the material need for independent space for increasing numbers of single working women in the early 20th century was addressed through a distinct form of architecture: purpose-built housing for single working women, emerging in the context of urbanisation, industrialisation, and shifting gender roles. These residences, developed across various national contexts, represented a confluence of social reform, feminist demands, and middle-class moral anxieties, expressed through a new typology that sought to accommodate and regulate women’s growing presence in the city.

The case studies of the Ada Lewis House in London, the *Lettenhof* in Zurich, and the *Ledigenheim* in Breslau reveal how architectural form was directly tied to broader social change. These buildings were not only practical responses to housing shortages but also symbolic interventions that reconfigured the relationship between gender and urban space. The presence of such residences within the city marked a significant shift in who was seen as a legitimate urban resident. Their visibility helped validate the lives of single working women, challenging dominant narratives that confined women to familial or dependent roles. Conversely, it was the increasing number of women living and working independently in urban centres that made the construction of such residences both necessary and acceptable—signalling a reciprocal relationship between architectural visibility and social presence.

The collective nature of these housing projects further shaped their impact. Shared kitchens, dining rooms, lounges, and gardens were not incidental features but integral to their design. These spaces facilitated collective living and informal networks, offering emotional, practical, and at times professional support among women navigating social and economic precarity. Especially for those outside traditional family structures, collectively functioned as an alternative infrastructure of belonging. While these arrangements enabled mutual support and resilience, they also reflected a degree of social control. Many residences imposed moral codes, rules of behaviour, or managerial oversight, highlighting the ambivalence between freedom and regulation embedded in these designs. As such, collectivity in these projects was a site of both solidarity and surveillance—shaped by class, ideology, and institutional goals.

Significantly, these buildings were not only spaces inhabited by women but often initiated and shaped by them. Agency over the built environment emerged through cooperatives, foundations, and reform organisations led by women, who engaged with design, planning, and financing processes. These actors operated within the constraints of their time, yet managed to influence the architectural and social character of the spaces they created. In a period when women were still excluded from many formal realms of power, these interventions represent a form of spatial authorship—expressing feminist and reformist ideals through the built environment. Decisions regarding room types, building layouts, public versus private space, and service infrastructure reflected complex negotiations of independence, care, modernity, and domesticity.

Returning to the central question of this paper—how women’s residences reflected social change and functioned as architectural expressions of reform—the case studies show that these buildings were deeply embedded in the gendered, moral, and political currents of their time. They responded to the realities of a changing workforce, to debates over respectability and autonomy, and to emerging ideas about domestic life and social belonging. While they did not fully dismantle gender norms, they offered new forms of spatial organisation that acknowledged and supported women’s independence, albeit often in a constrained or conditional form.

Rather than reading these projects as purely emancipatory or entirely regulatory, they are better understood as ambivalent spaces—sites of possibility shaped by negotiation, compromise, and context. They were products of overlapping forces: feminist advocacy, municipal reform, philanthropic intervention, and middle-class moral concern. As such, they offer insight into how space can reflect, mediate, and even produce social change.

These historical examples hold relevance today as contemporary debates continue to engage with questions of housing and gender. The challenges faced by working, single women in the early 20th century—economic marginalisation, social invisibility, lack of access to secure housing—remain pressing concerns in many parts of the world. Revisiting these early models underscores the importance of designing for collectivity and agency and reminds us that housing is never just about shelter—it is also about structure, identity, and the power to participate in shaping one’s environment. However, further research is needed to fully understand the long-term impact of these housing solutions on women’s participation in architectural reform and how they continue to inform contemporary discussions on gender and space.

At the same time, the history of women’s residences points to the need for more nuanced narratives: rather than a linear story of emergence and disappearance, these typologies were continuously reshaped across contexts, persisting in altered forms well into the post-war period. Current debates, such as those raised at the symposium ‘Housing for Single People – Narratives, New Perspectives, and Methodological Challenges’ (2025),

as well as theoretical perspectives from intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and queer phenomenology (Ahmed, 2006), add new layers to these questions. They remind us that housing is never neutral: it orients bodies in space, shapes belonging and exclusion, and intersects with multiple axes of identity and inequality. Understanding the ambivalent legacy of women's residences can thus contribute to a broader conversation on how domestic and collective spaces continue to negotiate autonomy, dependency and belonging today.

Acknowledgement

The author thanks colleagues, especially Prof. Dr. Maxime Zaugg, and peers for informal discussions and feedback during the preparation of this manuscript. No external assistance or institutional support was received.

Funding

No external funding was received for this research.

Ethical statement

This study does not involve human participants, animals, or identifiable personal data. Therefore, ethical approval and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval were not required.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Author contributions

The author was solely responsible for the conception, research, analysis, and writing of the manuscript.

Data availability

The data used in this study consist of archival materials from publicly accessible historical archives. All sources are cited in the manuscript. No new datasets were generated.

AI disclosure

The author acknowledges the use of ChatGPT (version 5.3) to proofread and improve the clarity and grammar of the final draft of this manuscript. All intellectual content, arguments, and interpretations are the responsibility of the author.

Biographical sketch

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Research paper

Outside Architecture: Feminist Manuals, Catalogues, and Services, 1960–1980

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

Citation: Bissett, T. (2026). Outside architecture: Feminist manuals, catalogues, and services, 1960–1980. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(2), Article 22. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/19070>

Published: August 26, 2026

ABSTRACT

Feminist space in North America between 1960 and 1980 was produced through tools, manuals, and service infrastructures; this article situates these practices within a longer genealogy of feminist spatial and organizational strategies. Drawing on women's centers and their associated networks of handbooks, support collectives, directories, and pedagogical practices, it argues that feminist movements reframed architectural production through repetition and maintenance, positioning service as a spatial practice. Through Nelson Goodman's notion of allographic art, the article interprets feminist how-to resources as scores: iterative notations that could be enacted across different contexts while remaining recognizable as part of a shared repertoire. Through examples including Cell 16's manuals, *The New Woman's Survival Catalog*, and the pedagogies of the Feminist Art Workers and various women's centers, it traces how feminist spatial epistemologies emerged less through canonical buildings than through distributed procedures of enactment, adaptation, and transmission. In doing so, the article proposes a genealogy of service in architecture, showing how feminist practices transformed instruction and maintenance into forms of spatial knowledge.

Keywords: feminist space, care ethics, architectural history, women's centers, women's histories

On 8 March 1971, a collective of women climbed the stairs of a disused knitting factory in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and refused to leave. They demanded rooms for childcare and meetings, a switchboard to provide information on women's services, and a place to learn, repair, and organize. Within months, these demands culminated in the Cambridge Women's Center, home to a Women's School with courses ranging from feminist histories to "fix-it" workshops, as well as a health collective and a hub for women's resource distribution. Though the project was site-specific, its practices were portable. Guides for setting up daycares, templates for self-defense classes, and step-by-step instructions for starting a credit union circulated through women's groups. Over time, these services were shared throughout North America, cohering into a feminist infrastructure grounded in repeatable practice.

This article argues that manuals, catalogs, and women's centers organized space through transferable procedures, constituting an architecture of service largely outside architecture's canon yet decisive in shaping urban life. Service is understood here as a programmatic principle that channeled needs into spatial capacities, turning demands for welfare and knowledge into shared frameworks that others could adopt and repeat. Nelson Goodman's concept of allographic art helps conceptualize how feminist 'how-to' resources were performed across contexts while remaining recognizable as part of a shared repertoire. What is at stake in this distinction is the possibility of understanding feminist procedural tools as architectural acts, where authorship emerges

through shared repetition rather than isolated creation, much like a choreography performed from a common score. A childcare brochure, a switchboard protocol, or an eldercare guideline was an architectural instrument as much as any drawing or plan. Handbooks, like *The Houseworker's Handbook*, and later the guidebooks by Women's Design Service codified feminist practices into flexible consultative methods that women could perform in different contexts. Catalogs such as *The New Woman's Survival Catalog* represented dispersed initiatives as a legible network. And women's centers, including the Cambridge Women's Center and the San Francisco Women's Building, turned resources into platforms for collective support.

Although I situate these spatial practices within a deeper genealogy extending from nineteenth-century service writing and cooperative networks, this article traces their feminist reformulation between 1960 and 1980. The account is necessarily partial, focusing on Britain and North America. Ultimately, this paper asks how feminist practices mobilized shared epistemologies that organized spatial relations, while exploring what counts as architectural production. These feminist contributions are not marginal supplements to architectural history but a genealogy of service-oriented practice that reshapes how we understand the discipline.

ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIES

Architectural history has centered on designers, patrons, and canonical works, yet recent scholarship has widened its scope to recognize women's contributions to spatial production through migration, administration, social work, pedagogy, and medicine, as well as through the organization and maintenance of space and its everyday uses (Adams, 1996; Awan et al., 2011; Frichot et al., 2017; Siddiqi & Lee, 2019; Burns & Brown, 2020; Steiner et al., 2023). Architectural practice is increasingly conceptualized beyond the building. Menna Agha's work with Nubian women's testimonies of displacement and reconstruction demonstrates how emotional labor is foundational to placemaking. She expands the figure of the architect to include those whose invisible or invisibilized labor sustains and remakes space, framing emotional contributions as a form of 'capital' (Agha, 2020). Sol Pérez Martínez and Anne Hultzsich argue that inclusive architectural histories require new research and reading practices, often engaging texts outside the discipline and written by non-architects. In "Reading-With: A Collaborative Method for Inclusive Architectural Histories", they show how a "radical listening" approach often surfaces unexpected insights into the built world as described by women (Hultzsich & Pérez Martínez, 2023).

Architecture as an expanded field owes much to Dolores Hayden's influential work on women's contributions, which positioned women's work and the labor of care as critical frameworks for understanding architecture (Hayden, 1982). In a similar vein, Gwendolyn Wright demonstrated how philanthropic organizations, popular women's magazines, and architectural pattern books mobilized domestic reform as a way of shaping the built environment. Through these media, women's labor was channeled into the everyday reproduction of architecture, as household upkeep and reform were tied to broader social projects of health, morality, and civic order (Wright, 1980). As Elke Krasny, Joan Tronto, and others have argued, architectural history has privileged autonomy and design while disavowing the temporal nature of maintenance that sustains dwelling and the processes that unfold around architecture's making (Krasny, 2019, p. 13–14; Tronto, 2019, p. 2–18). Sara Ruddick (1980) named these practices of nurturing and sustaining a form of "maternal thinking" that create "distinctive ways of conceptualizing, ordering, and valuing" (p. 359) that were still not "worthy of respect" (Ruddick, 1980, p. 357). However, this disavowal has obscured women's contributions, since some of their historical spatial agencies have taken the form of organizing and maintaining space rather than producing new buildings. Mierle Laderman Ukeles made this critique explicit in *Maintenance Art Manifesto* (1969), elevating cycles of cleaning and repair as creative practice. Similarly, Doina Petrescu framed Jennifer Bloomer's tropes of "mopping" and "quilt-making" as feminist forms of maintenance, recasting domestic and bodily labor as care acts that hold communities together and incrementally transform daily life (Petrescu, 2023). These scholars have insisted that maintenance and labor are not secondary to architecture but constitutive of it, a dimension through which women have historically shaped and sustained the built world.

Yet maintenance represents only one strand in a broader repertoire of overlooked practices. Beyond sustaining what already exists, women also produced services and resources, including manuals, catalogs, maps, and infrastructures, that codified the 'how-to' of making space and rendered collective action visible. In doing so, they claimed space beyond the home through struggles over safety, movement, housework, sexuality, and civil rights.

A SPATIAL GENEALOGY OF SERVICE

I use the term “service” to describe the organizational and material practices through which feminist collectives gave spatial form to shared needs, whether through the production of resources, the maintenance of infrastructures, or the provision of shared tools. As a noun, service denotes ongoing activity but also the means that make it possible. It is therefore bound to the mechanics of getting things done and the tools that facilitate events. If maintenance sustains what exists through repair and upkeep, service sets conditions for action by codifying steps, organizing flows, and brokering relations. Where maintenance stabilizes, service enables. This enabling quality rests in instructions and procedures that can be taken up and repeated across contexts. As feminist legal theorist Margaret Jane Radin writes, feminism and pragmatism are not fixed doctrines but “ways of proceeding,” committed to finding knowledge in the particulars of experience and in situated, contextual practices (1990, p. 1760). Manuals and handbooks function in this spirit, as working instruments that orient practice and allow it to take different forms across contexts.

Long before the resource movement of the 1970s, women participated in activist networks that provisioned space through collective infrastructures rather than single architectural works. I draw on these histories not to offer a full account but to highlight recurring patterns in how women organized spaces beyond the household. Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* shows that women's confinement to the home was not natural but produced through enclosure-era restructurings that curtailed common land and tethered reproductive labor to the household (Federici, 2004, p. 21–59). Women historically faced strict limits on movement that made independent life far more difficult. Yet even under these constraints, they generated alternative traditions that imagined social life otherwise (Federici, 2004, p. 38). Voluntary heretical movements across Europe experimented with collective forms of association that offered women new spaces of autonomy. Rejecting clerical authority, these sects created networks of “contacts, informal schools, and safe houses”—what Federici calls the first “proletarian international”—grounded in mutual aid and the local redistribution of resources (Federici, 2004, p. 33). Such infrastructures reshaped daily life and pointed to a broader genealogy in which the production of services became central to women's emancipatory spatial practice. In this sense, these heretical practices bound visions of a new social order to changes in women's everyday conditions, modeling early forms of shared spaces that were provisioned and maintained outside patriarchal systems of rule.

Later, across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women's articles and journals used services to define a public beyond the home.¹ Melusina Fay Peirce's *Cooperative Housekeeping* (1884) proposed domestic reform by outlining protocols for pooling labor, sharing meals, and managing collective kitchens, effectively scripting new forms of household association (Figure 1). The ‘service article’ became especially influential, carrying the procedural impulse into everyday advice columns, cut-out patterns, and step-by-step proposals to mitigate the burden of care. Comparable efforts emerged in settlement houses, and women's clubs where pamphlets codified sanitation, nutrition, and childcare routines into reproducible protocols. This literature, however, carried ambivalent legacies. Reformers like Peirce and Jane Addams cast service as a form of emancipation, embedding domestic labor in civic frameworks and reimagining the household as a collective unit of social transformation. Yet, well into the twentieth century, popular magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* or public health manuals like *How We Cook in Canada* reinforced patriarchal norms by presenting the how-to element of domestic labor as patriotic duty (Scanlon, 1995) (Figure 2). Thus, service writing did not form a coherent tradition: while some strands sought to liberate women from isolation through cooperative infrastructures, the far more dominant strand reinscribed their confinement within the private sphere. These contradictory tendencies show that literature could serve both emancipatory and disciplinary ends. It is against this backdrop that feminist experiments of the 1960s to 1980s can be read as both return and radicalization. Women's centers, small-press manuals, and feminist planning collectives such as the Women's Design Service brought diverse women's knowledge into the built environment, turning grassroots practices into specialized spatial programs. Unlike earlier reformers, these later feminist initiatives treated service not as a tool for improving women's domestic roles but as a participatory practice through which women produced their own spatial resources and infrastructures.

Figure 1

Melusina Fay Peirce's Cooperative Housekeeping. How not to do it and how to do it, 1884. Boston: James Rosgood & Co. Public Domain.

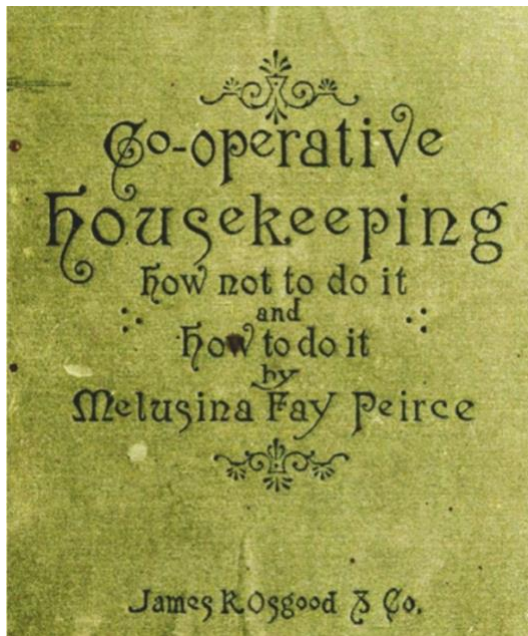
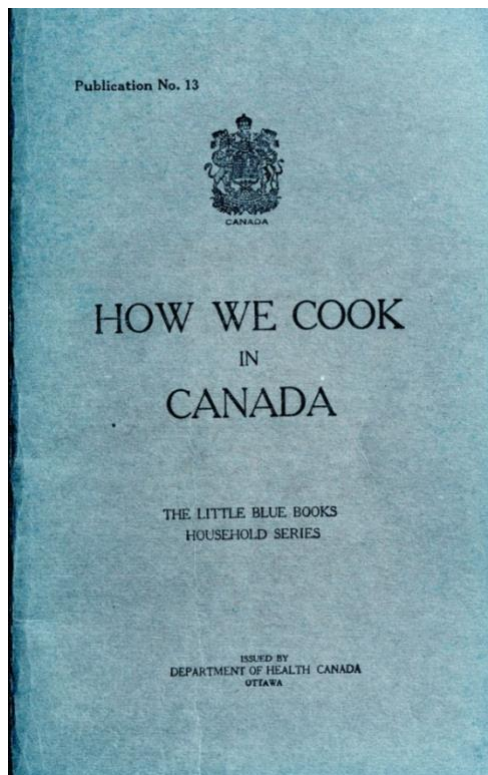


Figure 2

How We Cook in Canada. Published by Helen MacMurchy and Canada. Dept. of Health. 1923. Public Domain.



GRASSROOTING FLOWS: COMMUNITY TECHNICAL AID IN THE 1960S

By the late 1960s, the terms of spatial and political struggle had shifted. As struggles against racial and gender injustice intensified, disability activism gained ground, and the welfare state retreated, activists across North America and Britain began building their own infrastructures of survival. Resource-making emerged as a direct form of action. It was within this context that Community Technical Aid (CTA) reframed design as a public service, producing tools that enabled residents to manage and reshape their built environments (Wates & Knevitt, 1987, p. 29; Charitonidou, 2019, p. 41).

CTA translated professional expertise into locally governed instructions. Selwyn Goldsmith's *Designing for the Disabled* (1963), for example, translated lived experience of disability into guidance for architects and planners. The Black Panther Party's Survival Programs (1967–1982) developed neighborhood infrastructures such as free breakfasts, health clinics, and community patrols that offered models for grassroots provision.²

Women-led groups moved directly into this technical aid culture. The small-press boom of the 1970s produced manuals and handbooks as portable infrastructures for organizing meetings, securing space, and navigating the procedures through which space was allocated and controlled. Practice-led feminism codified tacit knowledge as instructions that reorganized daily movement and shifted habits from private households into collective, urban settings. The International Wages for Housework Campaign offers one well-known example, developing manuals for organizing around domestic labor, but countless lesser-known pamphlets likewise displaced dominant knowledge systems through bottom-up action.³

MANUALS

Manuals were tactical tools that translated feminist demands into everyday practices, reshaping how space was lived and used. The feminist collectives producing these manuals in the late 1960s and 1970s emerged from a broad political landscape, shaped by civil rights, anti-capitalist organizing, and women's liberation. Their manuals translated these intersecting demands into strategic instructions for daily life. One of the earliest examples was the Boston-based Cell 16, founded in 1968 by Dana Densmore, Roxane Dunbar, Betsy Warrior, Abby Rockefeller, and Jayne West. Cell 16's handbooks combined women's histories with pragmatic directives: they traced global contexts of women's oppression, offered ways to challenge the economics of unpaid domestic labor, and encouraged practices that expanded women's everyday mobility. They urged women to wear practical clothing, confront harassment, and build local cells able to act collectively while remaining autonomous. The first issue was intentionally unstructured, presented as a chorus of women's voices to signal solidarity through difference. The second, *No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation* (Figure 3), shifted toward action, outlining experiments in communal living outside patriarchal family structures, continuing to pair feminist theory with practical resources. By framing itself as one unit in a broader network of "cells," the collective used the manual to demonstrate how feminist ideas could be replicated and circulated elsewhere.⁴ Although Cell 16 dissolved in 1974, members Betsy Warrior and Lisa Leghorn went on to publish *The Houseworker's Handbook* (1975), situating domestic labor within a long feminist genealogy that included Charlotte Perkins Gilman.⁵ Cell 16 thus exemplifies a generation of organizations that shaped urban space through directives and manuals, using instructional forms to support feminist organizing across contexts.⁶

Figure 3

Cell 16: No More Fun and Games. A Journal of Female Liberation. 1969. Creative Commons. Courtesy of Duke Digital Collections.



Over time, feminist design groups carried the procedural forms of earlier manuals into planning and architecture, giving women's epistemologies new spatial uses. Feminist collectives such as Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative and the Women's Design Service (WDS) carried this ethos into participatory design methods (Matrix, 2022). Their projects actively tried to engage Women of Color,

working-class women, and same-sex couples to define the terms of design. In the United Kingdom, Matrix published *Making Space: Women and the Man-Made Environment* (1984), which was geared less to offering a toolkit and more to revealing the problem of the “man-made environment.”²⁷ Their analysis centered women’s needs in places that were typically frequented: housing, workplaces, shopping centers, and public washrooms. WDS grew from similar concerns but offered practical guidance for altering the environment at two scales: incremental and infrastructural. WDS foregrounded the idea of “service” to describe a mode of practice that linked community needs to skilled labor (Martin, 2009; Berglund, 2008). Its booklets, including *Shoppers’ Creches: Guidelines for Childcare Facilities in Public Places* (1988), *Thinking of Small Children: Access, Provision & Play* (1988), and *At Women’s Convenience* (1990), among others, collaboratively gathered evidence from focus groups to develop practical considerations for childcare in public space. WDS’s manuals did more than offer technical fixes; they rendered women’s diverse experiences of care into shareable forms.

CATALOGS

Tools were central to feminist networks, but these networks also developed epistemologies and mapping practices that made women’s services visible as infrastructure. Catalogs and directories reterritorialized cities by charting forms of lived experience onto their landscapes, transforming dispersed initiatives into a legible movement that allowed women to recognize themselves as part of a broader community. Publications such as the *London Women’s Handbook* and the *Women’s Yellow Pages* remapped cities by indexing services, resources, and meeting places, while projects like *Cora: The Women’s Liberation Bookmobile* in Canada extended feminist networks into smaller towns. These listing and connective forms allowed women to see themselves as part of a broader collective terrain rather than isolated groups. As Manuel Castells has argued, grassroots movements gain force when their dispersed sites become legible as a single entity (1983, p. 140). Catalogs and directories were therefore not ancillary but world-making.

One clear example of how catalogs transformed scattered practices into an identifiable movement was *The New Woman’s Survival Catalog*, which gathered dispersed feminist resources into a single volume and rendered them visible and navigable (Figure 4). In the summer of 1973, drawing on a course syllabus at Barnard College, alumna Kirsten Grimstad and women’s center board member Susan Rennie reversed the process of manual making. They undertook a two-month road trip across the United States to catalog organizations and spaces already “aimed explicitly at the development of an alternative women’s culture” (Grimstad & Rennie, 1973, p. 7). Inspired by Stewart Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalog*, their project gathered women’s services and resources that had not yet been understood as part of an interconnected network, compiling them as “tools” within one book (Miller, 2019; Grimstad & Rennie, 1973, p. 7). Over five months, Grimstad and Rennie assembled newspapers, credit unions, “banks, anti-rape squads, art galleries and schools, hospitals, non-sexist playgrounds, and childcare centers, bands, theatre groups, restaurants, literary magazines and scholarly journals,” organizing them into nine chapters: communications, art, self-health, children, learning, self-defense, work and money, getting justice, and building the movement (Grimstad & Rennie, 1973, p. 5). The catalog functioned as an instrument for connection, making scattered services visible as a coherent landscape and showing how individual initiatives could be understood as part of a larger feminist movement (Furter, 2019, p. 452).

WOMEN’S CENTERS

Emerging across the United States in the 1970s as a form of technical aid, women’s centers materialized feminist resources in urban space, translating demands for safety, childcare, education, and employment into spatial support structures. Notable for their cell-like networks, women’s centers sometimes doubled as shelters or spaces where women of diverse backgrounds could seek peer-based support. One of the first such buildings, the Cambridge Women’s Center, grew out of a rally on International Women’s Day in 1971 (Ruthchild, 1996). Protesters occupied the second story of an old building on Harvard’s campus and demanded that the university cede the space to the women’s collective or provide an alternative site. They sought a place where women could meet, organize, and access essential services without institutional gatekeeping. Their demands succeeded: funding was secured, and a permanent women’s center was established in a new location, where it continues to operate today.

Four pages from The New Woman's Survival Catalog. Brooklyn, New York: Primary Information. 2019. Original published in 1973. Images used with permission from Kirstin Grimstad.



The New Woman's Survival Catalog

A Woman-made Book

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THE FEMINE FIX-IT BOOK

By Kay B. Ward

Written by a woman for women, THE FEMINE FIX-IT BOOK takes the mystery out of tools and household repairs. In simple language, with accurate drawings, Key Word has included step-by-step instructions for hundreds of home projects, from simple electrical repairs and minor plumbing work, to simple furniture overhaul and complete maintenance.

THE FEMINE FIX-IT BOOK offers much valuable advice; however, it is intended as an aid to women in making necessary household repairs when they have time to do so. It is not intended to be used as a "fix-it" book. If you have time, use the book. If you don't, don't. THE FEMINE FIX-IT BOOK can be helpful.

1. If that old gear warning you're still going to continue, here's what to do.

1. That old gear warning you're still going to continue, here's what to do.

2. As a double safety against a shock, you may want to wear a rubber-soled shoe. If you have them, wear them. If not, wear a rubber shoe.

3. If that old gear warning you're still going to continue, here's what to do.

4. After pulling the switch carefully out of the box, you will see that it is a hollowed-in two-way. Unless there was something the terminal screws mounted on the switch box.

5. In many cases, however, after you have removed the switch you will see a third wire called a ground wire in the switch box. This wire is a frequently grounded and is usually attached to the back of the switch.

6. If this is a true switch box check with your hardware store on instructions to check the instructions on the packaging.

7. Replace the switch plate.

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WOMANHOOD MEDIA:

Current Resources About Women by Helen Wheeler

Notes Wheeler has chosen to begin her comprehensive book with an awareness inventory—200 multiple choice, true-false, and short answer questions. An awareness of the Woman's Movement, Wheeler also offers resources for information, including a critical bibliography, reading books, tapes, films, and pamphlets.

12. The average number of full-time women workers is approximately 68% of men's approximately 73% of men's about the same as men's

13. Key intelligent women who reach the major contract, and then goes

Alongside its role as a resource hub, the Cambridge Women's Center launched the Women's School, conceived as a counter-elite facility for collective education. It was developed in the shadow of Harvard

University by fifteen women committed to rethinking how spaces of learning could be retooled for feminist action. The collective explained its position clearly: “We agreed from the beginning on one important point: we did not want to create just another free university, a supermarket of courses where anything anyone wanted to teach would be offered. We feel this way because we think the women's movement needs to begin to define its goals and priorities” (Northeastern University Archives and Special Collections (NUA), 1972). As Cell 16 had done with its manuals, the courses brought the details of daily life into conversation with loftier social and political aims. The school aimed to demystify technologies such as cars and household repair equipment, while also offering shared knowledge sessions on family, sexuality, and the body. But it also had a political aim to “understand how sexism, racism, and imperialism are connected” (NUA, 1972). They felt it was important to build a movement that allied feminism with other social justice struggles, particularly the Civil Rights movement, and to confront anti-Black oppression more broadly by offering courses on the history of racial subjugation in the United States. The Statement of Purpose explains:

We wanted the school to include several types of courses: some dealing with specific aspects of women's oppression (health, nutrition, sexuality, the family); others to help us develop our skills and tools for communication (art, writing, fix-it); and others to help us see our own movement in a broader social, political, and historical perspective (economics, women's history, black history, revolutionary movements) (NUA, 1972).

In San Francisco, the first women's center began in a private home in 1970, later becoming the Women's Building, housed in Dovre Hall from 1979 onward (San Francisco Women's Centers (SFWC), 1980). As the first women-owned and operated community building, it began as a “room of our own” and continues to serve as a hub for community outreach supporting women, queer, and immigrant organizations (Guy, n.d.).⁸ As Stathis Yeros has shown, women's centers “deliberately invoked a decentralized network of women's spaces in the city,” and the Women's Building exemplified this by fostering a service-oriented urban terrain that supported infrastructures such as the Feminist Federal Credit Union of the Bay Area and the Women's Switchboard (Yeros, 2024, p. 79). Among these initiatives founded with the support of the Women's Building was the city's first women's shelter, La Casa de las Madres. Over the years, the center has facilitated a range of initiatives rooted in feminist action groups, including the Women's Prison Coalition and consultancy work by the Gray Panthers, who organized workshops in homes for the aged and independent living centers across California (Sanjek, 2010; Women's Prison Coalition, 1976).⁹ A letter from early member Roma Guy describes the first Women's Building as a crowded, bustling space with barely room to take a private phone call (Guy, n.d.).¹⁰ The premises at Dovre Hall were designed to accommodate childcare facilities, offices, a library, and a coffee shop, while also serving as an informal drop-in center. From the outset, the Women's Building pursued a dual agenda: it provided space for events within its walls while also incubating projects beyond them, extending its reach through a networked community.

Flyers advertising events at the Women's Building underscored the aim of creating a multicultural, age-diverse, and accessible space. Guy noted that a “full house” was only possible by working across class and cultural difference and with women with disabilities (Guy, n.d.).¹¹ The inclusive vision articulated in the flyers and by Guy eventually took visual form on the building's façade. Created in 1994, *Maestrapeace*, now one of San Francisco's most celebrated murals, replaced an earlier work to mirror both the community it served and the shifting demographics of feminist politics (Alicia, 2019) (Figure 5). The mural mirrors the transnational reach of the services housed within the building, projecting them outward into surrounding communities as part of a broader global feminist network. Women animate the façade—political prisoners, the Orisha Yemayah, Guatemalan human rights activist Rigoberta Menchú, and Puerto Rican revolutionary Lolita Lebron, to name a few—arranged so that they look toward and touch one another, a visual expression of relationality across difference and distance (Yeros, 2024, p. 92). Another section of the façade embodies the Women's Building's spirit of interdependence and joy: Guanyin (Quan Yin), the Bodhisattva of compassion, overlooks a scene of sculptor Olga Stornaoulo dancing with a woman in a wheelchair wearing an ACT UP T-shirt (Figure 6).

Figure 5

MAESTRAPEACE Mural on the San Francisco Women's Building, 1994, 2000, 2010. Created by Juana Alicia Miranda Bergman, Edythe Boone, Susan Kelk Cervantes, Meera Desai, Yvonne Littleton, and Irene Perez. All Rights Reserved. Pictured: Entire Mural from Corner of 18th and Laidge Streets.



Figure 6

MAESTRAPEACE Mural on the San Francisco Women's Building, 1994, 2000, 2010. Created by Juana Alicia Miranda Bergman, Edythe Boone, Susan Kelk Cervantes, Meera Desai, Yvonne Littleton, and Irene Perez. All Rights Reserved. Pictured: Quan Yin, Wheelchair Dancers and African Panel



What began as a handful of experiments soon became an urban phenomenon, as the women's center and resource movement took root in city after city. In Philadelphia, the Women's Center opened in 1972 and quickly established itself as a hub. Two years later, the Washington Area Women's Center opened with a similar mandate, offering legal counseling, employment support, and reproductive health resources. One of the best-known women's centers was the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, founded in 1973 by Judy Chicago, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, and Arlene Raven. It began as workshops in a

living room before expanding into a community space, first in a warehouse and later in a vacant industrial building that would be crowned with Kate Millett's *Naked Lady* sculpture (Linton et al., 2011) (Figures 7-8). Montreal also developed a network of bilingual women's centers that embedded feminist practice within the city's linguistic and political landscape, ensuring access for both francophone and anglophone communities.¹² Together, these initiatives show how women's centers adapted to local conditions while advancing a shared feminist project: grounding feminist practice in the everyday lives of women and transforming neighborhood buildings into visible infrastructures of care, safety, and collective knowledge. In London, Matrix would also carry this model into professional practice, most notably through the Jagonari Educational Resource Center (1987), which materialized Bengali women's community needs within a purpose-built space.

PERFORMANCE AND ALLOGRAPHIC SPACE

This body of work in manuals, catalogs, and centers approached space through procedures as prompts for action. Nelson Goodman's distinction between autographic and allographic arts offers one way to describe this mode of practice and its reliance on repetition and notation (1976). Architectural practice has long been tied to the singularity of the completed building and so aligned with the autographic. Goodman's framework allows us instead to approach these feminist practices as allographic, where the work unfolds through notations and can be realized many times without taking the form of a single object. Understood in these terms, manuals, catalogs, resources, and services become allographic instruments: their identity rests in the instructions they carry, which can be enacted in different situations while remaining recognizable as part of the same practice. These feminist services operated in an allographic mode. Like choreography, they combined a shared score with situated interpretation and held continuity and variation together. Care labor followed a similar form of practice: repetitive, recognizable, and never identical from one instance to the next. Feeding, cleaning, or repairing are recognizable actions, but they are always conditioned by time, context, and relation.

Figure 7

Front of the Women's Building with Kate Millett's "Naked Lady" Statue on Top. Women hold a sign for the building below. Los Angeles, California. Approximately 1978. Credit: The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2017.M.43) Gift of Sue Maberry. © J. Paul Getty Trust.



Collectives from the Los Angeles Women's Building carried the choreographic dimensions of feminist service work into performance art, translating the labor of care into staged, participatory practice. Groups such as the

Waitresses and the Feminist Art Workers choreographed performances to make the politics of women's work visible, often through humor, interaction, and spontaneous collective participation (Linton et al., 2011). Founded in 1976, the Feminist Art Workers explored how labor, violence, and community shaped space, adapting methods developed within the Los Angeles Women's Building to public settings.¹³ In their performance *Heaven or Hell?*, the collective performed as diners struggling to feed themselves with long poles, succeeding only when they fed one another, turning a shared meal into a feminist allegory of reciprocity that reframed service as mutual care rather than isolated labor (Figures 9-10).

Figure 8

People carrying Kate Millett's "Naked Lady" sculpture to the Spring Street Women's Building, Los Angeles, California. Approximately 1978. Credit: The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2017.M.43) Gift of Sue Maberry. © J. Paul Getty Trust.



In 1977, the Waitresses performed *Ready to Order?* in restaurants across Los Angeles. Playing with stereotypes of the waitress as nurturer, servant, or sex object, they humorously explored how these roles circulate both socially and psychologically (Moravec, 2008). The Waitresses also organized participatory workshops with women in the service industry, using collective exercises to surface networks of support. A promotional poster for a restaurant performance, *Scheduled Menu of Events*, explains:

We continue to serve the public, this time offering a new kind of menu. Our feast includes art performances by "The Waitresses." In our exploration of waitressing, we have located these key issues: stereotype, ie., waitress as mother/nurturer, servant/slave, and sex object; women and money; women and work; and sexual harassment. Each performance will focus on one issue while naturally touching upon all of them. To provide a fuller experience during this week, we've included various workshops, panels, and discussions. We hope you'll enjoy our palatable assortment of events. Bon appetit!

Similarly, Alison Knowles and Annea Lockwood's magazine *Womens Work* (1975) circulated scores and choreographies for women to enact in their own contexts, treating performance as something repeatable across settings (Knowles et al., 2019; Revell, 2022). Its opening page issued a clear directive: "[t]hese are scores ready for you to do. Please notify us of performances" (Knowles et al., 2019). The pieces ranged from concrete and plausible to difficult and absurd. "Write a letter to Ann Landers every day until one is printed." Or: "Spend a whole afternoon driving around the cloverleaf of a major artery. (At least four hours, say I-5)" (Knowles et al., 2019). Bici Forbes' score took the form of a curriculum, not unlike those at the women's centers, with classes nested from Elementary to Advanced. In its Women's Studies component, her Home Economics exercise framed preservation as a mode of meaning-making. She suggests: "[h]ide something you value very much. Keep it tucked away for one year. Throw it out without examining it. (This may also be performed as a potlatch concert:) Invited guests each bring something of their own that they treasure. Items are passed around, with or without comment, and then burned" (Knowles et al., 2019).¹⁴ In these instances, performance carried the same procedural impulse as the resource turn, gaining force through repetition, circulation, and enactment across contexts.

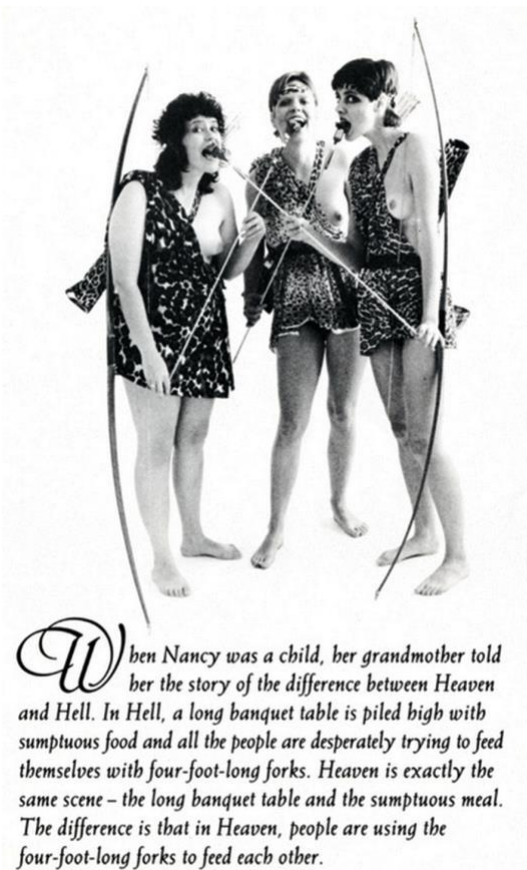
Figure 9

Feminist Art Workers performing Heaven or Hell?, 1979 at the National Women's Studies Association Conference at the University of Kansas. Credit: The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2018.M.16) Gift of Maria Karras, BFA, RBP, MA. © Maria Karras, BFA, RBP, MA.



Figure 10

Feminist Art Workers, Heaven or Hell? promotional poster. Credit: The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2017.M.43) Gift of Sue Maberry © J. Paul Getty Trust.



CONCLUSION

Although performance art stood apart from the practical aims of the resource movement, it echoed the choreographic qualities of women's labor and service that feminist organizers sought to spatialize and make visible. The rise of women's centers, schools, shelters, and self-defense clubs in the 1970s similarly relied on shared frameworks and instructions, creating an allographic mode of organizing space grounded in collective participation. Across North America and the United Kingdom, these initiatives reshaped cities as grassroots infrastructures took root in neighborhood buildings. Their visibility grew as groups worked to connect these sites as part of a broader movement, establishing recognizable networks of women-led services. As this service-oriented landscape expanded, it carved out new spatial opportunities for women and began to institutionalize practices informed by women's perspectives, long sidelined in architectural planning. These practices offered not only new forms of provision but an alternative conception of architectural work, closer to what Krasny and Tronto describe as an "architecture of care," one that privileges relational practice over formal or object-centered design (Krasny, p. 2019; Tronto, p. 2019).

This article has traced a feminist mode of space-making that works through scores rather than fixed plans: instructions, catalogs, centers, and performances that convert needs into tools for action. What emerges here is a different account of architectural knowledge, one located in the less visible practices through which space is organized, sustained, and transformed. By recognizing these resource-oriented services as architectural instruments, we acknowledge that spatial knowledge is produced not only in studios and offices but also in kitchens, meeting halls, and homes. This widening resituates architecture as a field shaped by processes of coordination and service as much as by its iconic forms. To recognize these as architectural instruments is to approach architecture as a practice unfolding through iteration and adaptation, where care is not an add-on but the ground of spatial production.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to those who have shaped my thinking about how space is made outside canonical architectural production, especially through conversations with Amari Peliowski Dobbs and Maria Pía Montealegre. I am deeply indebted to Marc-Fournier, whose thesis *From For to With: Towards an Allographic Approach in Architecture* (University of Waterloo, 2025) informed my approach in significant ways. I also wish to thank the peer reviewers, whose thoughtful comments greatly enriched the article. Finally, I extend my gratitude to Marias D'Avolio and Andri Gerber for convening the conference *Women Designing and Planning for Social Equity*, which first sparked the ideas developed here.

Funding

This article was funded by a UW-SSHRC Explore Grant.

Ethical statement

This article did not involve human participants, personal data, interviews, surveys, or experimental research, and therefore did not require IRB or institutional ethics approval. The research draws on published and archival sources cited in the article.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Data availability

No new datasets were generated or analysed during the preparation of this article. The article draws on published sources, archival materials, and historical documents cited in the text and bibliography.

AI disclosure

AI was not used in the course of writing, researching, or editing this article.

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¹ Feminist debates about rights and citizenship often circulated in novels, tracts, and legal literature, situating women as intellectual and political actors (Bell & Offen, 1983). Alongside this discursive tradition, however, a more practical current unfolded in women's periodicals and household manuals, which translated ideas into procedures for daily life.

² The concept of "grassrooting flows" in the section heading positions the actions of grassroots practice as a verb. See Castells (1999).

³ The campaign was initiated by Selma James, Silvia Federici, and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, but spawned many similar movements across nations.

⁴ A letter from Cell 16 titled *Cell 16 Lives* from February 1971 indicates the goals of the collective, particularly the communication goals between members and the greater community. It is held in Folder 5a (MF reel no. 1) in the subfolder female liberation: A radical feminist organization records (1968-1974). *Cell 16/Female Liberation Split: Cell 16 Statements 1970-1971*.

⁵ No More Fun and Games. *A Journal of Female Liberation*, 1(2) is digitized and held with a Creative Commons licence at Duke University Libraries.

⁶ Some examples are the Women's Action Alliance (WAA), the socialist feminist group New York Radical Women, the Marxist-materialist collective Redstockings (Willis, p. 1984, 117-150.), and the Chicago Women's Liberation Union (CWLU), and the National Black Feminist Organization (Davis, 1988) among many others. Guides and handbooks published from these collectives include *Non-Sexist Education for Young Children: A Practical Guide* (WAA, 1975) or *Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women's Movement*, (CWLU, 1972).

⁷ Karen Burns' introduction to the new edition of *Making Space* underscores this distinction in intention: Matrix was not prescribing a solution but rather demonstrating the problems women face in the urban environment (2022, ix).

⁸ Guy, R. (n.d.). *A what? Ah, a [women's] building*. Who We Are Outreach, 1978–1993, Communications, Reel 17, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society (GLBTHS).

⁹ A letter written by the Women's Prison Coalition outlines the support and collective initiatives toward prison reform. The letter is found in Women's Prison Coalition, 1976–1978, Sponsored Projects, 1973–1998, Reel 36, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society (GLBTHS).

¹⁰ Guy, R. (n.d.). *A what? Ah, a [women's] building*. Who We Are Outreach, 1978–1993, Communications, Reel 17, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society (GLBTHS). Also see "Fact Sheet" in the same folder.

¹¹ Guy, R. (n.d.). *A what? Ah, a [women's] building*. Who We Are Outreach, 1978–1993, Communications, Reel 17, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society (GLBTHS).

¹² There is evidence that women's centers emerged throughout most North American cities between 1970 and 1980, some developing from communication with earlier examples (such as the one in San Francisco). Most women's centers contain archives of their inception. Tanya Southcott presented on the Montreal Women's Center in her talk "Reconstructing Sainte Famille Women's Center" at the Domesticity Under Siege International Conference, Brighton, UK, April 2–4, 2025.

¹³ Members included Nancy Angelo, Candace Compton, Cheri Gaulke, Laurel Klick, and, later, Vanalyne Green, who joined in 1978.

¹⁴ Primary Information has recently republished *Womens Work*. See <https://primaryinformation.org/product/womens-work/>

Research paper

Exchanging capital: Feminist encounters in an urban squat in 1960s Copenhagen

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

Citation: Parby, J. I., Riesto, S., & Steiner, H. (2026). Exchanging capital: Feminist encounters in an urban squat in 1960s Copenhagen. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(2), Article 23. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/19071>

Published: August 26, 2026

ABSTRACT

This article considers Sofiegården, a cluster of properties in Copenhagen squatted from 1965- 1969 by young people seeking to create a community-oriented form of living. The story of these squatters and the political powers that worked to demolish Sofiegården challenges the dominant narratives of squatting in the 1960s. In historical accounts, Sofiegården is often presented as a conflict between young people revolting against the lack of urban housing and heroically creating new forms of cohabitation, while the politicians, developers, and police are seen as villains without empathy. Employing Pierre Bourdieu's concept of capital, we complicate this narrative by analyzing how the squatters – many of whose public-facing figures were women – strategically utilized their social and cultural capital to fight for urban justice and what they argued was their right to the city. In particular, we unpack the agenda of their most public opponent, housing mayor Edel Saunte, and her feminist position on urban justice, which ended up clashing with those of the squatters. The battle of Sofiegården thus opens a window to a complicated feminist encounter that ends in the use of hard power – a history that provides a useful branch of thought for contemporary debates concerning the housing crisis and spatial justice.

Keywords: squatting, feminist encounters, social and economic capital, equitable cities, housing justice

As cities across the world face a cost-of-living crisis and rising inequality in the wake of exploding housing prices, the history of squatting as an alternative strategy for living in the city compels the attention of both scholars and political activists. Issues of gentrification and social injustice following urban renewal have reignited interest in past forms of countering and protesting such development, as well as interest in the writings of scholars and activists on the topic, such as Ruth Glass (1964), Jane Jacobs (1961), and Henri Lefebvre (1968). This article considers Sofiegården, an area of seven buildings in Copenhagen marked for demolition that, between 1965 and 1969, was squatted by a group of primarily young people (in Danish, 'slumstormer' meaning literally 'chargers of slum'). Sofiegården is often mentioned as a prequel to the self-declared free town of Christiania, squatted in 1971 and continuing to this day, the most well-known and long-lasting example in Copenhagen (Vasudevan 2017/2023).

Many histories of urban squatting, including accounts of Sofiegården, are written from the perspective of insiders – personal memoirs by the occupants themselves, which therefore tend to emphasize only the squatters lived experiences and narratives (Squatting Europe Kollektive, 2013; Brekling, 2022; Kampmann & Widding,

1969; Junge & Lund, 2018). Insider perspectives are valuable resources since they offer both a situated insight into the contemporary positioning and internal relations of the squatters as well as their later processing of their experiences. But insider perspectives are also challenging for historians to work with because they present a partial perspective on situations and processes that are highly complex and contested. Methodological and theoretical positions that can challenge, complement, and complicate the narrative become particularly relevant. This article thus examines the encounter between the squatters at Sofiegården and the political establishment that they were opposing.

Over time, the squatters took care of or – depending on one's perspective – took advantage of the declining building mass of the inner city and acted, again depending on one's perspective, reasonably or opportunistically, given Copenhagen's shortage of urban student housing. By the 1960s, living standards of the welfare state had risen, and both public and private employers requested a workforce with better education. A larger proportion of young people thus had access to higher education in Denmark than ever before; 35,000 in 1970, compared with 9,000 in 1960 (Farbøl & Olesen, 2025). In that decade, the number grew from 6,000 to 24,000 at the University of Copenhagen alone (Københavns Universitet, n.d.). This created a heavy demand for student housing. Dilapidated buildings in the inner city that were condemned for demolition and abandoned by people moving to the suburbs became low-rent or even no-rent accommodation for young students – and others. While the student revolts of the 1960s, in Denmark and beyond, were in large part a response to what was seen as academe's outdated curriculum and its hierarchy of power within a broader outdated patriarchal societal structure, for many of the students, housing was also a central concern. Sofiegården as an enactment of housing and urban justice issues thus goes hand-in-hand with the changing political formations and youth revolts across the Western world. During the years of Sofiegården's existence, these political formations solidified and became visible in the formation of left-wing political movements who protested against the Vietnam War, nuclear technologies, as well as other political manifestations of post-World War 2 Western capitalism.

Several of Sofiegården's spokespersons were actively aligned with the emerging youth culture and the left-wing and revolutionary movements of the day, including to oppose power hierarchies and to search for new, community-oriented forms of living in the city, speaking against oppressive structures against women and other minority groups. Among Sofiegården's most public figures were the women Britta Lillesøe and Dorrit Kampmann, who, while not defining themselves explicitly as feminist activists, in many ways were aligned with feminist agendas. This was a time when new feminist ideas about class, justice, and alternatives to heteronormative and patriarchal family structures were broadening the agenda of the traditional fight for political and economic equality between men and women that had long been primarily organized within the framework of Danish Women's Society (Dansk Kvindesamfund), founded in 1871. In particular, many younger, left-wing activists did not believe that change could be achieved by working within the existing political establishment; instead, the struggle for gender equality had to be connected with the struggle for a more fundamental societal change. The Red Stocking Movement (Rødstrømpebevægelsen), officially founded in 1970, was one of the key examples of this more radical and activist approach, which also led to several squatting experiments with women's collectives.¹ One of the main slogans of the more radical feminists was "Ingen Kvindekamp uden Klassekamp, ingen Klassekamp uden Kvindekamp," meaning that the struggle for women's rights could not be fought without simultaneously combating capitalist power structures.

As events around Sofiegården progressed, the young people who had been moving into these dilapidated buildings since 1965 increasingly came into conflict with the dominating social democratic party, who held the majority in both national and municipal politics. One of their main adversaries was Edel Saunte, a woman lawyer, politician, and women's rights champion who had been active in the Danish Women's Society since the 1920s. Sofiegården thus became a site where several women in different positions along the period's politicized feminist spectrum clashed over goals and values. Power dynamics played out in both soft and hard forms as part of the struggle over not just Sofiegården and its future but also what life in the city should be or could become. In short, it was a place where normative questions concerning justice and good life clashed and were negotiated. This makes it a highly suitable case through which to interrogate feminist encounters over the issues of squatting and justice during the economically booming years of Danish welfare state capitalism in the mid-20th century (Esping-Andersen, 1990). We weave a complex interpretive web around Sofiegården and the historical source

¹ See for example this anonymous interview: "Tværpolitisk kvindesag er tidsspilde," interview i Kvinden og Samfundet, juli-august 1974 – Danmarkshistorien | Lex and Ipsen, Pernille. (2020). Et åbent Øjeblik. Da mine mødre gjorde noget nyt. Gyldendal.
https://danmarkshistorien.lex.dk/%E2%80%9CTv%C3%A6rpolitisk_kvindesag_er_tidsspilde%E2%80%9D,_interview_i_Kvinden_og_Samfundet,_juli-august_1974

material available to us. We show how the Sofiegården-squatters actively used their social capital in their struggles to remain in the buildings, and we unpack the motivations and values that drove not only the squatters but also their political opponents, particularly Saunte.

In this article, we employ three lines of questioning to explore the relationships between feminism, housing issues, and ideals of urban life as they unfolded in the case of Sofiegården:

- a) The values and aims that drove both the squatters and their opponents to the city council, in response to the urban and societal context within which both groups operated;
- b) The activist strategies the squatters used in their struggle to maintain their squatted spaces and alternative lifestyle in the city, and how their political positions, class, education, and gender intersected with other markers of difference such as cultural capital and social networks; and
- c) The conflict around Sofiegården and its occupation and demolition and eventual replacement by new buildings, all of which exposed different notions about feminism and urban justice.

In the dominant historiography of squatting, the practice is often presented as a liberation project by a group of people who were marginalized in urban policies and who claimed their right to both occupy space in and to change the city (Kadir, 2014, on the right to the city see Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008 and 2012). Even if the discourse and historiography of Sofiegården have together formed a kind of Danish prototype for later squatting movements, the actual organization and events of Sofiegården differed in so many ways from the history of the more famous Christiania or the later generations of squatters of the 1980s that the story of the site must be treated with a carefully selected vocabulary and attention to detail; as we will show, even calling it a squat is problematic.

The first squatters, whose occupancy may be seen as a balancing act between licensed and illegal squatting, moved into the properties of Sofiegården in 1965. They argued that they were unable to find appropriate and affordable places to live in Copenhagen and wished for a different lifestyle in the city, with a basis in community and self-organization. And so they did, organizing the properties as a 'kollegium' – a word used in Danish for student housing, which also means community run by its own governing structure, containing dwellings, community spaces, a second-hand shop, and places for creative activities such as music, photography, dance, and theatre. Yet, less than five years after the squatter moved into Sofiegården, in February 1969, most of the buildings were cleared in a spectacular illustration of hard power, with over 200 Copenhagen police officers converging on the larger Christianshavn district (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Sofiegården in February 1969. The squatters had just been forced out and the condemned buildings in which they had resided have been demolished



Note: Photo ©Dagny Sørensen/Museum of Copenhagen.

SQUATTING AND EMPOWERMENT IN THE POST-WAR WELFARE STATE

The central protagonists at Sofiegården were often both empowered and disempowered at the same time, driven by both political agendas and more mundane concerns – all the imperatives of a capitalist society. Pierre Bourdieu cautions against thinking of capital as monetary or capitalistic in the narrow sense (e.g. as profit-oriented) (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 16) He explains that the:

structure of the distribution of different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world, i.e., the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 183).

Bourdieu also compels us to take the symbolic dimension of culture seriously when it comes to capital. At Sofiegården, as we shall see, building alliances and accumulating non-fiscal forms of capital played crucial roles in the events and encounters that unfolded.

Furthermore, rejecting the binary of formal versus informal architecture, we aim to inscribe Sofiegården in the context of the housing policies of the post-war welfare state. We understand squatting as both an alternative to and part of established societal power structures such as housing policies, omnibus media, and political institutions. Our study combines observations from the existing literature on Sofiegården with oral history accounts documenting the squatter's histories in newspaper articles, TV programs, memoirs, photographs, and other archival material. Among the main sources are the collected photographs, artefacts, and memoirs from Sofiegården in the Museum of Copenhagen's collection, including video interviews made for the permanent exhibition gallery Right to the City, which opened in 2020.²

Figure 2

In 1965, a group of young people moved into a group of condemned houses, all two- or three-story houses in Christianshavn dating back to the 18th century.



Note: Photo: Mogens Falk-Sørensen, January 1961, ©Copenhagen City Archive.

Introduction to Sofiegården and its licensed squatters

In 1965, a group of young people moved into a group of condemned houses in Christianshavn: Sofiegade 3, 5, and 7, Overgaden oven Vandet 32 and 34, and Dronningensgade 33, 35, 37, and 37A, all two- or three-story houses built in the 18th century (Figure 2). This group of houses was soon named Sofiegården, after the neighboring street Sofiegade. It would become one of the foundational sites for Denmark's burgeoning left-wing

² The interviews were conducted as part of the production of the movie "Kampen om byen - retten til et sted at være", produced by Adam Rieper and Christine Hybschmann for the gallery Retten til Byen in the permanent exhibition of The Museum of Copenhagen. The movie consists of a combination of historical filmclips and interviews with squatters and activists involved in squatting activities in Copenhagen between 1965 and 2025. Due to copyright issues it can only be viewed in the museum.

youth culture and the student movements of the late 1960s. The buildings had been condemned since 1963, in accordance with a new municipal planning document, *Kvartersplan*, and were owned by the private housing cooperation *Danske Andelslejligheder* together with a private solicitor. The first squatters officially rented their rooms as storage spaces from *Danske Andelslejligheder*; they put up dark curtains to avoid the police from discovering that they also inhabited the buildings. They thereby legally rented the spaces to begin with but illegally occupied the buildings. The young people who initially moved into *Sofiegården* did not see themselves as squatters but rather housing activists. They soon began to negotiate openly with the private landlord and the municipality about acquiring temporary permission to inhabit the buildings until they were due for demolition. Among these first squatters were Britta Lillesøe and Jesper Sølling, who later became a couple. More people moved into these and the neighboring buildings, together creating 46 apartments for themselves in these buildings (M.S., 1968). *Danske Andelslejligheder* tried to raise the rent, but Lillesøe, Sølling, and others opposed them, and in the summer and fall of 1965 a more formal arrangement was reached between the squatters and the owner (Kampmann & Widding, 1969).

Throughout the occupation of the condemned buildings, the inhabitants paid a nominal rent. As such they were not strictly speaking ‘squatters’ in the regular sense of the word, which implies unlawful occupation without any monetary exchange; they are better described as proto-squatters, or ‘licensed squatters,’ as they are known in London, among other cities (Ferrerri, 2023). But for the sake of brevity, we will still call them squatters in this article, since the *Sofiegården* inhabitants have historically been described as the first of new kind of squatters (*slumstormere*) in postwar Copenhagen.

Between April and October 1965 approximately 60 more residents moved into *Sofiegården*. The squatters created *Kollegiet – Lejerforeningen Sofiegården*, a self-organized tenants’ association that specifically mentioned student housing in its name. Its first spokesperson and chair were Jesper Sølling, followed by Dorrit Kampmann and finally, No Widding. The organization established a waiting list for those who wanted to join the squat, and it also collected the rent, which was used for communal expenses, such as the cleaning and maintenance of shared facilities and compensation for the squat’s administrators (Kampmann & Widding, 1969, pp. 38–39).³ The apartments were small but considered affordable at the time, 25 square metres for 134 DKK per month. Since the municipality kept a close eye on *Sofiegården*, the squatters also established a system of shared responsibility for keeping the buildings up to fire regulation standards. They began restoring some of the most dilapidated buildings, partly in dialogue with a preservation organization called *Friends of Old Copenhagen* (*Det Gamle Københavns Venner*), whose goal was to reverse, through restoration, planned demolition. Until early in 1968 the municipality generally seems to have accepted the arrangements of intermediary use of the buildings as student housing and suggested that the solution found in *Sofiegården* could be extended to other condemned houses in Copenhagen.

While the squatters managed to turn the run-down buildings into a significant cultural and social experiment, the squatters were under increasing pressure to prepare to vacate, beginning in February 1968. Two houses in particular, *Dronningensgade 33* and *35*, were scheduled for demolition in the spring of 1968 and the whole building complex in the spring of 1969. The residents succeeded in postponing the demolition, but two buildings were finally torn down in late February and early March 1969, after tumultuous scenes when a large police force stormed *Sofiegården* on February 26, 1969. The squatters protested non-violently and some were arrested. Following this clash with the authorities, some of the squatters returned and continued to live in the remaining buildings of *Sofiegården* until the summer and fall of 1969, when an agreement was reached with the municipality to rehouse some of them in another run-down and neighboring property, at *Dronningensgade 6*. The rest were relocated to other condemned or municipally owned apartments or sought housing elsewhere on their own (Brekling et al., 2022; Hansen, 1986).⁴ This meant that *Sofiegården* was fully vacated when the remaining buildings were demolished on January 5, 1970.

This collective occupation of several adjacent houses was a new experience for the squatters and the private property owner (*Danske Andelslejligheder*) alike. There had been examples of individual squats earlier in the post-war period, but nothing like this. These firsts led to a number of peculiarities that complicate the story beyond that of the subsequent dominant narrative of squatters, in which illegal occupants claim space despite opposition from authorities in an established society. *Sofiegården*’s squatters paid rent and presented an intermediary solution to the shortage of student housing to the municipality. They established a partnership with *Danske Andelslejligheder* and the municipality regarding the tearing down of houses in the backyards, and their negotiations with the municipality delayed the demolition. Moreover, the agreement that allowed several of the

³ The rent was 5.76 DKK per month per square meter, plus a 30 DKK flat contribution from all units.

⁴ Brekling et al. 2022, p. 205-6; Hansen, Helle Schjellerup: ”Kampen for autonome rum – om de københavnske husbesættelser”, KH, 10, 1986, pp. 25-47. Information shared in group interviews with former squatters of *Sofiegården* in fall 2025.

squatters to take part in the afterlife of the area following the clearance – the new student housing that was built here in the early 1970s – all suggest that this conflict was unlike the much more confrontational and violent squat-clearances of later periods, a fate that also would mark the end to Sofiegården.⁵

The story of Sofiegården and its residents, a complex event that included multiple lived experiences, has since crystallized into a rather simple narrative: a clash between a visionary group of young, idealist leftwing people trying to create a new way of life and the reactionary forces of politicians, entrepreneurs and policeforces who stomp down on the squatters and throw them out to protect nonsensical property rights, capitalist interests, and petite-bourgeois decorum (see e.g. Danmarks Radio, 2019a). This narrative highlights the disempowerment of young students due to violent political action. This crystallization began with the highly mediatized moment when Sofiegården as a squatted living experiment came to an end.

But the actual history of Sofiegården is connected to broader trends in urban development of the postwar period and Sofiegården is about more than just two sides in conflict over the right to live somewhere versus property rights. In the period leading to the conflict, parts of inner-city Copenhagen were falling into disrepair. Between 1950 and 1975, the population of Copenhagen dropped significantly⁶, a decline caused by deterioration and suburbanization connected to a huge increase in public infrastructure and private car ownership, compounded by a turn to North American ideals of urban planning after the Second World War (Lykkebo, 2022). The result was a new push to commercialize and transform the city center, for example with the permanent closure in 1962 of a mile-long commercial street in the center of the Copenhagen, Strøget, when it was pedestrianized which was extended to neighboring urban streets and squares later in the 1960s. Other parts of central Copenhagen were characterized by increasing decay in this period. By the mid-1960s, the Housing Commission of Copenhagen Municipality had declared 26,000 properties unfit for dwelling and decided that these buildings should be either demolished or renovated. Yet hundreds of these properties were never renovated, and they became more and more dilapidated.

Indeed, during this period many Copenhageners left the city center and their often-dilapidated homes and moved into the newly built suburbs, which offered new ways of living, afforded by an economic upturn and access to modern-standard housing for working- and middle-class families (Lykkebo, 2022; Tietjen, 2010). This process certainly affected Christianshavn, including the buildings of Sofiegården; Christianshavn was at the time a notoriously run-down and diverse inner-city district where many working-class families still lived in houses dating to the 17th and 18th centuries. The archives of the Housing Commission and the municipal building register reveal that many of the buildings were plagued by damp conditions and decay, but also that some residents were allowed to remain in their apartment despite plans for demolition.

Christianshavn, which escaped the big urban fires of 1728 and 1795, contained many buildings that were 300 or 400 years old or more (Figure 3). Individual lots were densely populated, built initially to cater for the district's historical population of navy and harbor personnel, as well as sailors and other blue-collar workers from the factories and shipyards in the inner city. The working-class population was mixed with lower middle class and when the squatters moved to Sofiegården a few older residents, like the vice consul, P. Nørregaard and his wife, had been allowed to stay in the building despite their condemnation (Copenhagen City Archive 1963). We do not know if it was because the couple were elderly or if they could not find housing elsewhere. Boundaries between legal and illegal, empty and occupied, squatter and non-squatter are fuzzy, and the goals and the means considered necessary and meaningful changed on each of these 'sides', as the sense of acceptance and opposition between squatter and municipality took different shapes during the period.

Sofiegården was an experiment that developed and changed over time, and Christianshavn was in many ways an ideal neighborhood to test the ideas the activists entertained for it. However, much of the thinking and discourse about Sofiegården emerged along the way, often only becoming clear in hindsight. One of the young activists, Britta Lillesøe, said in an interview in 2020 that: "We didn't even know the word 'kollektiv.' I just thought along those lines" (Rieper & Hybschmann, 2020, 3:05–3:09). The young squatters envisioned a shared living space with different apartments but many communal activities. Those collective spaces included rooms for communal eating and cooking, collective creative work and performances, a shared TV and reading room, a stage in the courtyard, and a darkroom for the development of photographs, as well as communal baths and WCs. The squatters also shared an ideology of occupying buildings with the purpose of renovating them and thus saving them from demolition.

⁵ No Widding, former spokesperson of Sofiegården's squatters was head of the board of the new student housing that was going to be built on the site, and from 1972 on when it was built, he lived for a time in a flat in the complex as a form of caretaker. No Widding in Brekling ed. 2022, p. 207.

⁶ According to Statistics Denmark (Danmarks Statistik) – in the Municipality of Copenhagen the population dropped from 768,105 in 1950 to 622,773 in 1970.

Figure 3

The young residents at Sofiegården began by restoring some of the most dilapidated buildings.



Note: This photo shows the buildings along the street Dronningensgade as seen from the inner courtyard of the building block that Sofiegården was part of. Photo: Mogens Falk-Sørensen ©Copenhagen City Archive.

THE FEMINIST ANTAGONIST: EDEL SAUNTE

To begin to grapple with these shifting lines of acceptance and opposition, we turn to a prominent figure in the story of Sofiegården, Edel Saunte (1904–1991) (Figure 4). Saunte had for decades been a powerful force in the municipality's effort to clean the slums – 'sanering' in Danish, literally the 'sanitization' of urban areas. By the late 1960s, Saunte had earned a remarkable reputation as a proponent of gender equality (Borchorst, 2023). She was a lawyer and champion of women's rights, a Social Democrat who led the Danish Commission on the Status of Women from 1965 to 1974, for which she suggested initiatives to improve gender equality and the situation of Danish women in the country (Saunte, 1962–1974).

Saunte was Copenhagen's mayor of health and housing from 1962 to 1974, a member of the municipality's Housing Commission, and, during the summer of 1968, alternate city mayor for a short time. It was in these capacities that Saunte became a leading figure in countering the presence of squatters in Sofiegården. She set in motion the use of the police to clear out the squat with force, and she was called out as a main enemy of the squatters. Hers was a more traditional view of feminism than that of many in the young generation that the squatters at Sofiegården were part of. They were more aligned with the activism of the Red Stockings and the new revolutionary Marxist (and in part Leninist) political party VS (Venstresocialisterne), founded in 1967. Many of Sofiegården's residents were involved in establishing VS (Kampmann and Widding, 1969), a party with close ties to student organizations and activist groups (VS programerklæring, 1969) as well as certain feminist and anti-nuclear movements. Politicians from VS raised Sofiegården's case multiple times at the city council meetings (M.S., 1968).

The kind of feminism Saunte represented was not tied to activist left-wing and social justice movements but rather that of a less radical type: individual role modelling, career achievements, and gradual improvements of women's position in society rather than radical societal change. In an interview, she explained how she herself was able to follow a political career in large part because of her husband's job as a composer and his tolerance and support on the homefront, taking care of the kids and other chores (Borgen 1974).⁷ This perspective was also the dominating one among the political elite of the Social Democrat party that promoted individual women, like Ritt Bjerregaard, Eva Gredal, and Dorte Bennedsen, who all became ministers in 1972, rather than undertaking a revolutionary restructuring of the party hierarchy. So even though both Saunte and the student squatters at Sofiegården represented positions that were aligned with feminist movements, they did not share political views on the means and goals necessary to create a just and equitable society.

⁷ https://danmarkshistorien.lex.dk/Transskription_Edel_Saunte_fort%C3%A6ller_om_et_liv_med_karriere_og_familie_i_1986.

Both in her mayoral role in Copenhagen and as a member of the municipal housing committee, Saunte was responsible for the assessment and improvement of living conditions in Copenhagen. Along with many other politicians, as well as bureaucrats and technicians, Saunte believed that living in the condemned buildings in central Copenhagen was harmful in various ways. In a 1963 report, she wrote: “Many of the buildings’ deficiencies are a daily burden on the residents in terms of their health and ways of life and create a feeling of social injustice” (Danmarks Radio, 2019b).⁸ Not everyone agreed with Saunte; as we shall see, various normative notions of justice and the good life clashed in and around Sofiegården, as well as in the encounters between Saunte and the Sofiegården community. Indeed, Sofiegården’s spokespersons, Britta Lillesøe and Dorrit Kampmann argued for the potential of squats in challenging traditional household patterns. They promoted their right to define their own lives and habitation plans without adhering to traditional municipal housing policies of the 1960s that still demanded couples to be married or engaged before they could be offered an apartment (Nissen, 2012).

Saunte and the other members of the Danish Commission on the Status of Women laid the ground for the establishment of an Equality Council, appointed in 1975, which supported and promoted gender equality until in 2000, when it was shut down and replaced by other initiatives. Although Lillesøe, Kampmann, and Saunte would all agree that the issues discussed in this commission were important, they disagreed on the means by which to create a society that offered equal opportunities for all. These disagreements, if not at the center of the conflict between Saunte and the squatters, contributed to the unfolding of events at Sofiegården. What they disagreed upon was less about the need for gender equality than about what justice might look like, e.g. from a class-based or generational perspective. Given the severe shortage of student housing that everyone acknowledged, the squatters either acted either reasonably and took care of the declining state of the inner-city building mass, or they exploited the opportunity for cheaper living. It may sound puzzling that anyone would become their main opposition, particularly a woman who was a feminist politician who, one might assume, ought to support students in finding a reasonable place to live, when they themselves were figuring out how to make the problems work within the opportunity they envisaged. Yet, Saunte was determined to ensure that all Copenhageners would have a decent standard of housing, and she considered the demolition of condemned housing and the realization of new buildings as the way to reach that goal.

Figure 4

The mayor of health and housing, Social Democrat Edel Saunte, was a powerful force in the municipality’s efforts to clear slums.



Note: © Tidens Kvinder/The Royal Danish Library.

⁸ “Mange af de konstaterede mangler betyder en daglig belastning for beboernes helbred og for deres livsførelse, og de skaber en følelse af social uretfærdighed.”

EXCHANGING CAPITAL: BETWEEN FORMAL AND ACTIVIST STRATEGIES

How did the relationship between squatters and state and municipal authorities unfold and change over time and how did they straddle both formal and more activist, informal strategies? In interviews from the time and later reflections, the squatters portrayed themselves as struggling youngsters opposing strong powers attempting to overwhelm them (Kampmann & Widding, 1969). However, upon closer inspection, some of them possessed significant social capital. It was, for instance, useful that the father of Dorrit Kampmann and her two sisters, who were also part of the world of Sofiegården, was Viggo Kampmann. He had been Denmark's Social Democratic prime minister from 1960 to 1962 and was still friends with a fellow Social Democrat, Urban Hansen, the lord mayor of Copenhagen. The Sofiegården squatters actively used this connection to win acceptance for their illegal occupation (Widding, n.d.).

This connection, and others, meant that many of the squatters knew about administrative procedures. Also, their upbringing and education had given them a great deal of social capital that could be mobilized to gain and maintain their access to relatively cheap living spaces. Furthermore, the creative and experimental environment of Sofiegaarden attracted many neighbors and culturally interested people and turned into a social capital that gave the squatters advantages and networks. These realities help us to understand the issues of inequality, justice, and the 'right' to the city revealed by the conflict between the squatters and the city's officials and police. The whole enterprise seems to demonstrate that some of the squatters were unusually informed. Although often portraying themselves as improvising novices, they possessed a lot of formal knowledge about building regulations and the politics of the municipality. Early on, in the fall of 1965, when the squatters presented their plans for the intermediary transformation of the buildings, they organized a detailed system of administration and several channels of communication with the municipality and the neighboring community. Being not only well connected but also well-educated and building such systems they were not entirely outside of hegemonic norms, but sometimes even reproducing them in ways that anthropologist Nazima Kadir found in a study of squatters in Amsterdam (Kadir, 2016).

After the squat was dissolved, two of the Sofiegården squatters, No Widding and Dorrit Kampmann, published the book *Tilfældet Sofiegården*, a collection of writings from Sofiegården's internal 'newspaper' – meeting minutes and documents documenting the history of the squat and manifesting the squatters' own narrative. This book states that their first contact with Edel Saunte in the early phases of the squat was positive (Widding & Kampmann, 1969, p. 39). In October 1965, they contacted mayor Urban Hansen again, writing that they will bring a letter to a forthcoming meeting with Hansen. This letter, they write, is written by:

former prime minister V. Kampmann, who strongly recommends the planned usage of the properties for homeless students. At the same meeting drawings of how the properties will be used for student accommodation with the buildings in the courtyard demolished is presented (...). Further, a written application to use the houses for student accommodation delivered.⁹ (Kampmann & Widding, 1969, p. 30)

According to the squatters' account, Hansen responded positively but was skeptical about what the municipal administration would say. He reportedly recommended that the community contact architect Troels Schmidt from the municipal Housing Commission with whom the squatters had a meeting in November. Smidt's response was very negative. He did not regard the building as a complex suitable for living. A few days later, at a meeting with Saunte in her capacity as mayor of housing, the atmosphere became even more tense: Saunte initially supported the project, but after conversations with other members of the administration, she started to express concern. The Copenhagen police also began building a case against the illegal residents, and as the squatters later wrote, "We managed to confuse the police to such a degree that the case is prolonged for a very long time" (Kampmann & Widding, 1969, p. 31). The community of squatters portrays themselves in their book as spirited and savvy, essentially building positive alliances with people who possessed the capital resources that would facilitate the exchange of property, power, and influence. Although they were not wealthy, the squatters were certainly well connected, with access to positions of power, and skills in everything from accountancy to physical labor and building renovation to media strategy and letter writing. In 1968, one newspaper reported that 'a whole range of famous people' had been part of hindering the demolition of Sofiegården (M.S., 1968).

Sofiegården's squatters also built alliances with and reportedly gained support from other groups in society, such as workers at the nearby shipyard Burmeister and Wain (B & W), other student groups, and other neighbors

⁹ "Til hvem der medbringes et brev skrevet af Fhv. Statsminister V. Kampmann, der stærkt anbefaler den planlagte udnyttelse af ejendommene til boligsøgende under uddannelse. På samme møde fremlægges tegninger over beboelsen planlagt til kollegium, med baghusene nedrevet. Samtidig fremlægges den skriftlige ansøgning om benyttelse af husene til kollegieformål."

in Christianshavn (N.N, 1969; Knoblauch, 1969). This seems to have been part of a strategic attempt to connect with ‘ordinary’ and working class-people, downplaying the students’ own cultural and social capital. As Kampmann and Widding later stated: “We are ordinary citizens who are dissatisfied with the daily abuse by those in power on the societal groups that are in a weaker position. Therefore, we have the sympathy from a majority of the population” (Kampmann & Widding, 1969, p. 84).¹⁰

Fire safety was a crucial issue, but according to the squatters, the fire department took a positive attitude on the condition that the heterogeneous mix of mews and outhouses in the courtyard – including those belonging to a municipal property next door – were demolished. In December 1965, Copenhagen City Council in fact awarded 30,000 DKK for the demolition (Kampmann & Widding, 1969, p. 30), complicating the line between formal urban policies and informal practices of squatting. In January, the city architect, the municipal health officer, and a high-level administrator visited the properties to inspect the hygienic improvements, and, according to Sofiegården’s own account, approved the conditions as long as the long-planned installation of toilets went ahead (Kampmann & Widding, 1969). After further consultations with Urban Hansen, more formal requests were made, but over the next two years there was no formal response from the municipality. An overview of the case that the aforementioned architect Schmidt, sent to Hansen, in October 1965, demonstrates a common position within the Housing Commission. On the one hand, the Housing Commission wanted to reach a compromise with the squatters and thus offered them five years to realize their plans before demolition would take place. On the other hand, they needed to clarify that they could not negotiate the condemnation of buildings in an unhygienic state. And more broadly, they needed to avoid further situations like Sofiegården, for example by shortening the time between when the decisions of the commission were made and when demolition and renewal occurred.¹¹

The final permission to tear down two of the squatted buildings of Sofiegården was given on February 26, 1969, although the squatters later claimed that they had been allowed to stay until at least 1971. Having invested considerable time and resources in renovating the properties on that basis, they considered the early demolition to be unfair.¹² The rest of the buildings were torn down in late 1969 as the squatters were moving to other condemned houses offered to them by the municipality. Lillesøe later indicated that the squatters held diverse positions, many that were part of other late 1960s youth subcultures: anarchist ‘provos’ and people of different political leanings, including ‘extreme far-right subjects’ as well as ‘alcoholics’, ‘drug users’ and ‘vagrants’ (Kampmann & Widding, 1969, pp. 6–7, p. 25). According to Lillesøe, the squatters had dubbed Sofiegården a ‘kollegium’ for tactical reasons, to connect it with the political cause of student housing provision: “We did call it ‘Kollegiet Sofiegården’ for a time – to be amenable” (Lillesøe, n.d.b 2:50).¹³ The press called the Sofiegården squatters ‘students’ or ‘kollegianere’ (students living in student housing), although musicians, craftspeople, and wage earners also lived there (Lillesøe, n.d.a, p. 10) (Figure 5).

The squatters at Sofiegården were not a uniform group, although the majority were socialist and left-wing students, the political positions, activist approaches, and internal group dynamics and alliances were diverse and in flux, as is common in groups of politically engaged youths of this era. Negotiation across the spectrum of formal and informal processes, along with the clever exchange of their social and cultural capital to benefits made it possible for them to successfully occupy the buildings for over four years. As Vasudevan proposes, squatters’ way of living in post-war cities was a practice which itself showed a path for reforming society and urban living through self-organization and a value-driven approach to co-habitation (2017). This narrative also drew support and sympathy from large sections of the Danish public. The Sofiegården community’s spokespersons were highly conscious of their role as cocreators of their portrayal in the national media; according to No Widding: “We constantly make sure to feed the press so as to make it obvious that we are the reasonable ones” (Danmarks Radio, 2019a). Using these formal channels of communication has become a useful activist tool.¹⁴

The squatters increasingly despised the social democratic version of post-war welfare capitalist society where apparent the road to social equity was the building of swaths of pristine concrete housing in the suburbs, a path that Saunte, as the housing mayor, both embodied and worked to realize as an elected public representative. The

¹⁰ Vi er almindelige borgere, der er utilfredse med magtudøvernes daglige overgreb på de svage stillede grupper i samfundet. Derfor har vi også størstedelen af befolkningens sympati”.

¹¹ Københavns Stadsarkiv: Boligkommissionens arkiv, Saneringer, CH1, VII, redegørelse fra Troels Schmidt til Urban Hansen, 13. oktober 1965.

¹² Newspaper reports quotes them for saying that the squatters of Sofiegården had spent 100.000 DKK on the renovation of buildings and open spaces, Snap: ”Hvem ejer Sofiegården?”, BT March 1, 1969, p. 12.

¹³ “Vi kaldte det jo også ‘Kollegiet Sofiegården’ en overgang – for ligesom at være spiselige”.

¹⁴ ”Vi sørger hele tiden for at fodre pressen, så det er tydeligt, at det er os, der har rimeligheden på vores side”

squatters accused her of suffering from a kind of amnesia, since the municipality had formally accepted the squat for a while and then revoked that decision. Saunte in turn leveled the same accusation against the squatters and completely dismissed the squatters' claim to their housing (Kampmann & Widding, 1969, p. 52). Houses destined for demolition must and would be demolished, she stated. We can speculate about what caused the delay of demolition: in a heated economy, with massive activity in the building sector, these particular demolition and reconstruction projects may simply have been postponed. Ultimately, Saunte was willing to use and even orchestrate hard power to follow through on her decision. It became a case of winners and losers and squatters lost.

Figure 5

The young residents organized the properties as a 'kollegium' – student housing or community, run by its own governing structure, containing dwellings, community spaces, a second-hand shop, and places for creative activities such as music, photography, dance, and theatre.



Note: Photo: Knud Henriksen, ©Scanpix.

CONCLUSION

Indeed, the squatters worked to exchange their social capital – as members of an influential up-and-coming group – for access to living space and for the right to develop and practice another vision of urban life. They actively made use of their social capital as squatters to build alliances with people in structural and economic power positions, including the property owners who had an interest in postponing the demolition, which could help the squatters gain and promote their access to living space of under-market value. They also successfully portrayed themselves as 'ordinary' to make alliances with people of the working class or 'groups in a weaker situation,' which strengthened their cause. Yet the life of Sofiegården as a squatted community ran its course, coming to a violent end.

In an undated interview sometime after the events discussed here, Lillesøe said that as one of Sofiegården's founding residents, she regarded the site's subsequent development where a new complex for student housing was built on the site of the then demolished buildings in 1972 and called Sofiegården with some ambivalence. Her words reveal the different viewpoints that existed within the community, ranging from radical to more consensus-seeking positions:

Well, some of us thought we could have fought on, and maybe we could have kept it if this and that – yes, I was one of those who was a bit – well, I was desperate to stay on and keep it and work and keep the restoration process. And he [No Widding] was just so pragmatic and found some young [architects] who could build some reasonable residential stuff, but for me it was nothing but a concrete slum and stuff like that – but I was like, ah no, a new Sofiegården, I just could not bear it. Well, I knew people who lived there and who liked it – but I would like to say – well, now that it turned out this way I still think – well, what they have inherited from us is the self-governing form of living, and I know it's student accommodation which is very

attractive and which has long waiting lists. And they have all our photos in the foyer from the Storm where we are sitting and the police are coming.¹⁵ (Lillesøe n.d.b: p. 0:25)

The 'Storm' Lillesøe refers to is what she calls the events of 1969. The residents barricaded themselves inside the buildings and declared themselves the 'Republic of Sofiegården', a radical, independent community that had separated itself from mainstream Danish society and law. Over 200 police officers then broke through the barricades and arrested around 40 people.

Sofiegården certainly was not the last squat in Copenhagen; indeed, it is sometimes seen as the mother of Danish squats. By 1971 there were around 20 'slumstormer'-squats in Copenhagen's condemned building mass, including the Woman's House (Kvindehuset) and most famously Christiania, which was established in 1971 on former military terrain (Brekling, 2022; Tietjen et al., 2007). Other 'slum-charged' properties followed, like Folkets Hus in Nørrebro and Hudegrunden at Vesterbro (Karpantschof & Mikkelsen, 2002). But by then, the Sofiegården squat had long been demolished. A whole new community was being built on the site, with dwellings, communal spaces, a kindergarden, and a creche, as well as the student accommodation Lillesøe mentions in the extract above, which still stands today and which seems to have deliberately drawn lessons from the first Sofiegården.

The violent, traumatic, and resource-intensive decision to clear the properties and build a new structure has in many ways framed the narrative of Sofiegården in posterity. It can be seen as the first clearing of squatted property, emblematic for its use of massive state power. When looking at the narrative that emerges in the administrative sources, the story of Sofiegården is a much more blurred and nuanced story. Activists, supporters, and municipal staff all tried to find a common ground that would balance the deteriorating building mass, the need for student housing, and the new practice of squatting – or rather, licensed squatting, as defined above, which was an intermediary solution. The violent and dramatic end of the old Sofiegården dims the volatile and pioneering spirit dominating the relationship between the authorities, private owners, and the residents in the early years. And even in the final year of increasing conflict, Sofiegården still presented a case for testing ways of restoring and maintaining the existing building mass of the city instead of demolishing it, a case that points toward the ideals of urban renewal and sustainability of a much later period.

The solidity of the communal aspect of Sofiegården is also a heritage integrated in the new complex t which has allowed successive generations of students to form a self-governed community on the site, thereby sowing the seeds for a continuation of the forms of procedural justice that were at the core of the Sofiegården community. It is precisely this ambivalence that turns Sofiegården into a case that enables us to ask complicated questions about how particular housing arrangements might play a role in creating just cities in distributive, procedural, and intergenerational terms.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Anna Søe, David Clark and Sean Yuxiang Li for their help with archival work and Merl Fluin and Lenore Hietkamp for copy editing and formatting this article. We also would like to thank the Museum of Copenhagen and the Copenhagen City Archive for help with archival material and to the two anonymous peer reviewers and the editors for insightful comments that helped us improve the original manuscript. In particular, we would like to express our gratitude to the previous residents of Sofiegården for sharing their stories with us over the years.

Funding

The work for this article was made possible through a generous grant provided by Augustinus Fonden for the research project Stories from Sofiegården: Alternative Forms of Living in Copenhagen as Cultural Heritage.

Ethical statement

The interviews and personal stories and memories which we draw for this article have all been published previously. We are grateful that the former residents of Sofiegården continue to be willing to share their

¹⁵ "Altså nogen af os tænkte, vi kunne godt have kæmpet videre, vi kunne måske godt have beholdt det, hvis og hvis et eller andet – det er rigtig nok, der var jeg nok en af dem, der var lidt – jeg var helt vild efter at blive der og beholde og gøre, restaurere videre – og han har så været pragmatisk og fundet en løsning der med nogle og fundet nogle unge [arkitekter], der kunne bygge et rimeligt bolighaløj – men for mig blev det jo betonslum og alt muligt – jeg var sådan, åh, jeg var sådan, åh, en ny Sofiegård – jeg kunne slet ikke holde det ud – altså så kendte jeg senere nogen, som boede der, og var glade for det – men det som jeg vil sige – når det endelig skulle være så synes jeg alligevel – fordi det de har arvet fra os det er selvstyre og jeg ved, at det er et kollegie, som er meget attraktivt og som har lange ventelister og de har jo alle vores billeder i deres foyer – fra Stormen, hvor vi sidder og politiet, der kommer."

memories, but we also would like to recognize that not everyone's story has been heard. Any interpretation or mistake are the authors' own.

Competing interests

No competing interests.

Author contributions

JPI contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis and writing. He reviewed both the original draft and the reviewed manuscript and oversaw the final version of the article. SR contributed to conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis and writing. She reviewed both the original draft and the reviewed manuscript and oversaw the final version of the article. HS contributed to conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis and writing. She reviewed both the original draft and the reviewed manuscript and oversaw the final version of the article.

Data availability

All data is included in the manuscript.

AI disclosure

The authors report no use of AI in preparing this article.

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Research paper

Column Inches: Women Taking Space in Homemaking Magazines in Interwar Britain

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

Citation: Banister, A. (2026). Column inches: Women taking space in homemaking magazines in interwar Britain. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(2), Article 24. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/19072>

Published: August 26, 2026

ABSTRACT

During the interwar period in Britain women's magazines provided a place to rethink design practice and how it could further social equality. Although long overlooked as source material in the history of the built environment, women's magazines can reveal intimate insights into the social and political responsibilities held by women in architecture and design. Recent scholarship has argued that magazines offer a more complex view of women's experiences of modernity that previously presumed, and by leaning into such middlebrow, mass cultural objects, this paper argues that we can uncover valuable insights into women's views and expectations of culture, politics, family, home, work, money, and citizenship. In the female-dominated sites of magazine production, space was made on the page for the presentation and discussion of modern design. Working within the confines of a patriarchal society, women writers and editors challenged the canon and published articles on designs for social equality, such as how the single working woman could live independently. Whilst women's writing on architecture rarely appeared in architectural journals of the interwar period, their views were transmitted to wide audiences in magazines targeted at female readerships.

Keywords: feminism, magazines, periodical studies, architectural histories, interwar Britain

During the interwar period in Britain, women's magazines provided space to rethink architecture and consider how it could further social equality. As the content of, but also as contributors to and consumers of, magazines, collaborative networks of women underwrote complex debates about modern ways of living, encouraging social and political engagement and responsibility. Using the British edition of *Good Housekeeping* magazine as historical case study, this article considers how, by using the concepts of space and architecture as a way of focusing the tools of periodical studies, publications promoted possibilities to women against the backdrop of changing employment and family norms and universal suffrage.

The field of periodical studies has recognized the immense potential of magazines as unexplored archives for women's cultural history.¹ The association of magazines with the middlebrow and mass culture, and the gendering of this culture as feminine, coincided with the large-scale democratisation of publishing during the early twentieth-century, creating a period of change and power in female readerships. This paper, through its consideration of the collaborative practice of architectural writing and reading as opposed to a focus on the

¹ See, for example, 'The Edinburgh History of Women's Periodical Culture in Britain' series

singular (male) architect-hero, promotes a leaning-in to the middlebrow to reveal details about women's experiences with modernity in relation to issues of domestic space.

Within the physical spaces of the page, analysis of formats and codes – linguistic and bibliographic, internal and external, editorial and commercial – and a recognition of the different methods of reading text and image, magazines provide researchers with dynamic cultural objects for the study of architecture. This analysis makes clear that through using print media as source, the focus of architectural history can be shifted to a more multifaceted feminist reading. It is due to the complexity and diversity that periodicals offer in terms of form, space, and network that a unique means through which voices of otherness in narratives of architectural history can be considered.

The magazine in question – *Good Housekeeping* – was launched in Britain by William Randolph Hearst's National Magazine Company in 1922.² Its opening editorial promised readers articles about 'what concerns them and interests them most', answering 'the burning questions of the day...by women who are fearless, frank, and outspoken' (Author unknown, 1922, p. 11). It provided extensive advice, expert opinions, recipes, and a consumer testing service through the Good Housekeeping Institute, as well as problem pages, letters from readers, fiction serials, and articles on current affairs. Through its pages, the sites in which it was produced, and the readership which consumed it, *Good Housekeeping* provided space within mass culture for women to think about their understanding and place in a fast-changing world.

Following the First World War, publishing provided women with new career options and the opportunity for institutionalised cultural capital, particularly in the fields of journalism and advertising. Through word and image, women could take up space in places where their presence was formerly not considered or allowed: in discussions surrounding modern politics, social issues, and culture. Its sites of production, as well as its readership, formed a community of women that investigated new innovations in the built environment, and its articles detailed how such advances could further social equality, rethinking domestic design from a feminist perspective. By looking beyond the built at architecture on the page, we can realise the ways in which women influenced and shaped modern design and highlight the importance of the intricate networks of collaborative practice which are key to feminist revisions of history.

METHODOLOGY

In order to create a more inclusive architectural history and to acknowledge previously overlooked contributions it is necessary to expand parameters. The methodology of this paper does this in two ways: firstly, by expanding the idea of who designs, and, secondly, by looking beyond the built at the other forms architecture takes.

In questioning more established theories of modernism, which place so much focus on the figure of the singular, genius (and often male) architect, as problematic and reductionist, parameters can be opened up to consider the role of other figures – in the case of this article, journalists, editors, and social commentators – and the ways in which they collaboratively shaped the built environment. Readings which favour artistic individualism can result in an overlooking of architecture as a collaborative profession and product of complex relationships. As Cheryl Buckley (1986) notes, in attaching meaning to a single name, the historical process is simplified, both understating production and consumption in favour of promoting the personality (p. 10).

Narratives of architecture are inherently shaped by the written word, and by looking at architecture in the context of periodicals studies, we can explore how women's writing shaped modernity in interwar Britain.³ Language plays an important role: the term 'genius', for example, has particular pertinence in architectural history, which has been written as 'a succession of geniuses' described as male (Battersby, 1991, p. 16). Similarly, the term 'hero' has been recognised as promoting a tendency to ignore collaboration and constrain women as passive others to active male designers (Worden & Seddon, 1995, p. 177). These labels of accomplishment are inadequate at measuring success and histories written within such parameters identify architects as the 'individual from whom the entire conception of the building came', to the detriment of the recognition of contributions of others, including women (Willis, 1998, p. 59). Lynne Walker (1989) describes the resulting refusal to acknowledge women in architecture as 'a case study in patriarchal control and economic hegemony': architecture physically shapes and defines society, and therefore works to maintain the status quo, so women's participation in architecture is both politically and economically charged (p. 102). By moving away from the individual figure of the architect and looking at, in this instance, networks of women working in the magazine industry, we can see how collaborative practice and social commentary shaped spaces of the interwar period. Patrick Collier

² *Good Housekeeping* began in the United States in 1885, before being acquired by the Hearst Corporation in 1911

³ On the relationship between architecture and writing, specifically in terms of gender see, for example: Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*; and, more recently, Darling, *The Avant-Garde in the Drawing Room*, and the WoWA project: <https://wowa.arch.ethz.ch/>

(2015) specifically celebrated the ability of periodical studies to do exactly this: to direct attention to a greater number of voices and to examine culture beyond the canon (p. 99). These sources help us question how we come to know what we know by providing intimate reflections on how women constructed their gender identities and experienced modernity.

Collier (2015) went on to note that entire runs of periodicals can present an 'unmanageable plenitude of texts', the reading of which is a very different experience from the reading of a book (p. 107). Collier (2015) suggested using the methods of 'close', 'distant', and 'surface' reading: focusing on the how the multiple internal forms interact to give meaning, how larger patterns form throughout texts, and how rhetorical patterns change over time, respectively (p. 108). When looking at *Good Housekeeping* in Britain from its launch in 1922 to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the periodical studies methodology of longitudinal reading is highly relevant, unveiling a complexity of trends, themes, and meanings. Over the interwar period the magazine revealed patterns and changes in British society. The 1922 Law of Property Act, which enabled husband and wife to inherit each other's property, was referenced in the article 'The New Law of Property' (Normanton, 1924). Further legislative developments, such as that passed in 1926 which allowed women to hold and dispose of property on the same terms as men, are reflected in monthly architectural features highlighting specific homes and in advice literature on the legal and economic side of homeownership.⁴

SPACE: THE ARCHITECTURE OF MAGAZINES

Periodical studies methodologies form the basis for discussing the spaces created inside of the magazine to discuss the environment built outside of the magazine. Magazine design can be considered a form of architecture in and of itself, and through analysis relationships can be formed between the idea of page-space and feminist ideas of space. Periodicals are 'hybrid, composite' sources which command multiple and fragmented spaces simultaneously (Hackney & Bigham, 2022, p. 103). In order to make sense of the different types of content contained within *Good Housekeeping* – fiction, fashion, architecture, design, opinion, advertisements – this section will take what Penny Tinkler (2016) has described as a 'holistic approach', and consider how design practices involving codes, form and layout, and the relationship between image and text work together to organise the whole and create meaning (p. 31).

When using periodicals as source materials, it is important to recognise the unique formats and codes they present, and to consider different methods of reading in order to understand them. Jerome McGann (1991) wrote of the difference between linguistic codes (semiotics and semantics of words) and bibliographic codes (such as typefaces, page formats, and bindings) when using texts as sources, highlighting how 'meaning is transmitted through bibliographical as well as linguistic codes' working together to generate overall intention (p. 57). With regards to periodical texts more specifically, Brooker and Thacker (2009) focused in on what McGann termed bibliographic codes, arguing that the 'physical material of the magazine itself is...a crucial factor in understanding the texts and images found within its pages' and that a 'materialist deconstruction will seek to disclose how different modernisms are marked by the accents of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and region' (pp. 6, 10). It is in these codes – in the architecture of the page as well as in architecture on the page – that designs for social equality in women's magazines can be communicated and understood.

As McGann noted, it is often the relationship between codes that creates meaning and significance. Brooker and Thacker used the example of advertising, which fits into both the internal and external categories: their placement in the page layout of the magazine contributes to the internal code, whilst their relationship with the wider world of commerce and the magazine's readership contributes to the external code of the publication (p. 6). *Good Housekeeping* used such internal and external codes to blur the boundaries between editorial and advertising content. For example, readers were confronted with 'advertorials' which used design to make sponsored content look like journalistic articles, or with advertisements repeatedly published across successive issues to reinforce messaging. This demonstrates the periodical's unique ability to confront readers with information presented in mixed formats, invoking 'creative strategies' for reading, and resulting in a 'much richer and more nuanced vision of the periodical as a specific and dynamic print cultural object' (Clay et al., 2018, p. 6).

In October 1924, for example, the *Good Housekeeping Institute* published an article on 'The Care Your Floors Demand' detailing through text and instructional photographs step-by-step guides to clean and maintain domestic flooring. The article noted that 'too much emphasis cannot be laid on the wisdom of equipping your home with an efficient vacuum cleaner' and went into depth about the hygienic aspects of cleaning, such as the 'dust- and germ-laden air' inhaled when cleaning carpets (Cottington-Taylor, 1924, p. 30). These sentiments, particularly in relation to health, were echoed further through the issue in a full-page advertisement for the Whirlwind Suction Sweeper on page 103. In order to avoid 'faces, lungs, clothes – grimed, choked and smothered with dust', *Good Housekeeping* readers were encouraged to buy the Whirlwind (p. 103). Despite its

⁴ See, for example: Bryant Hobbs, Buying an Estate House; An Actuary, House Purchase Problems

position in the second half of the issue, the advertisement, in its relationship to more prominently featured editorial content, bridged internal and external codes to create meaning and legitimacy.

This interlacing of repeated thematic messaging throughout *Good Housekeeping* – whether vacuum cleaners and their positive effects on health or wider concepts such as modern femininity – created what Collier (2012) termed a 'value marked grid': an ordering of page space allowing the reader to move through the periodical's messaging, creating a hierarchy of content through which readers could negotiate multiple, often conflicting, views (p. 492). These 'grids' were formed through systems of 'organising rubrics', whereby repetition created feelings of reliability and predictability for the reader (p. 493). In *Good Housekeeping*, this was maintained through repetitive structures and schemas: architectural features always had at least a double-page spread and always appeared after romantic fiction and political opinion pieces but before the fashion pages. Magazines used bibliographic and spatial codes to denote the value of the content, such as more important content, or that written by popular figures, in the opening pages and lesser known or less important features further towards the back pages. The editorial decision to give full-pages and large-scale illustrations to the architectural features denoted the importance of home-design in *Good Housekeeping*. Every month spotlighted a different home, with lengthy text written by an architect describing the layout and innovative features, accompanied by large photographs of the exterior and more detailed photographs of the interior. Floorplans consistently accompanied these articles, suggesting that readers were well-versed in reading spatial drawings as well as analysing images. These reliably reappearing features created order and coherence but were also a means through which the magazine created its own identity within the growing market for women's magazines as one which valued architecture and created an identity for its readership as one which was educated in spatial design and architectural jargon.

Where the 'value marked grid' becomes a more challenging concept is the relationship it has with advertising: that spaces of 'value' in the magazine could be purchased, such as the Whirlwind's full-page spread. In *Good Housekeeping*, where advertising took up a lot of page space, the magazine's editorial team built and maintained trust by assuring readers that 'advertised goods are good goods', selectively given page space having been screened and approved.

Within the 'value marked grid' of *Good Housekeeping's* ordering and page layout lies another level of meaning construction through the architecture of the page: the relationship between image and text. The semiotics created through the text/image connection is a key proponent of Tinkler's holistic approach to magazine study and demonstrated new ways of seeing and constructing meaning during the specific time period (2016, p. 31). For instance, the boom in women's magazines in Britain during the interwar period coincided with the popularisation of, and increasing accessibility to, the cinema. Fiona Hackney (2008) linked Charles Eckert's concept of 'emotional fantasy generating' in popular media, when films became 'living display windows' for products and constructed fantasies of womanhood drove commerce, as a metaphor applicable to magazines (Eckert, 1990, p. 120). Filmic techniques such as montage structures offered different models of modern womanhood and provided a space in which women could experiment with different identities and explore 'what being both modern and a woman might mean' (Hackney, 2008, p. 120). Readers of *Good Housekeeping* would have been viewing new films alongside reading magazines, and a link can be drawn between the montage-effects in both media. For example, the use of collage across a single page and the jumping through different content types across a single issue of the magazine were akin to cinematic cross-cutting. The reader, like the cinema viewer, commanded a large view of collated information which required active engagement to create coherent meaning and a safe space to experiment with facets of modern womanhood.

Hackney and Bigham developed the idea of viewing magazine space as 'window' and 'mirror', with the page presenting and reflecting the 'fissure' between reality and fantasy (p. 105). Much as film was fantasy-generating, magazines covered 'fantasies of modern living (magazine-as-window) alongside an acknowledgement of how people lived (magazine-as-mirror)' (p. 134). In *Good Housekeeping*, photography of aspirational homes provided a 'window' – a glimpse into the sort of life a modern woman could lead – but by also featuring homes that were within the economic reach of its readers, the magazine remained relevant and realistic. The interaction of photography and text on the architectural pages produced the 'space of agency and female subjectivity' described by Hackney and Bigham and 'intensified the experiential and transformational promise of modern homemaking' (pp. 108, 122). This required new methods of looking and constructing meaning and suggests an active reader who can assimilate and accommodate content according to their own desires and circumstances.

Collier (2012) described the 'metonymic and microcosmic' nature of periodicals and their role in repackaging and making sense of the world into something consumable and comprehensible for its readers (p. 492). In terms of *Good Housekeeping*, the busy and contradictory pages of the magazine reflected the messiness of interwar Britain – postwar recovery, changes in women's status, changes in family dynamics – but through its spatial organisation it avoided overwhelming its readers and instead reflected this complexity and multiplexity in a coherent and reliable way. Using the 'mirror' and 'window' techniques of magazine publishing, *Good Housekeeping* bridged the gap between the reader as she was and the reader as she wanted to be in the modern

world. Through page space, it provided space for women to inhabit and to see both the fantasy and reality of how architecture could shape modern life.

NETWORKS: SITES OF PRODUCTION / SITES OF CONSUMPTION

The diversity of content and form in magazines reflected the new status of women as modern citizens, but as well as being present on the pages of the magazine, modern women were also present in the sites of production. Women's magazines of the interwar period provided spaces to rethink traditional gender roles and promote equality in emerging professions, in fields such as advertising, public relations, and journalism. Hackney noted that the women's press became increasingly dominated by a female workforce as it was believed that women were best suited to understand their own audience, ushering in a 'new breed of female journalist' concerned with improving their readers' lives (Hackney, 2008, p. 117). Women with institutionalised cultural capital, in the form of professional journalism training, domestic science qualifications, or employment, had the power to inform opinion in new ways. *Good Housekeeping* magazine employed such women, promoting their voices in conversations about modern life, public discourse, and social equality, and giving a platform for their opinions on architecture and design: making space through words rather than through buildings.

This is exemplified in the figure of Alice Maud Head, who, following work at *Country Life*, *Woman at Home*, and *Nash's Magazine*, became Managing Director of *Good Housekeeping* and the National Magazines Corporation. Through her business strategy and networking skills, Head built up a strong roster of contributors to the magazine and developed profitable relationships with advertising agencies; a task which was fundamental for the survival of the magazine, whilst at the same time influenced the spending habits of thousands of households. As seen above in the links between the editorial on clean floors and the Whirlwind advertisement, advertisers sought to link their products with the construct of the 'modern housewife or domestic manager' as consumer, through the adoption of the language of feminism and by linking social liberation and equality with freedom from housework via labour-saving devices. Through these networks, Head and her collaborators shaped how the idea of the modern woman and her modern ways of living were constructed.

Head's colleague, Dorothy Daisy Cottington-Taylor, worked as the Director of the *Good Housekeeping* Institute, following an education at the National School of Cookery and King's College for Women, where she obtained a Certificate in Household and Social Science. Her regular column for the magazine – 'Household Engineering and Housecraft' – provided step-by-step photographs to guide readers in home maintenance tasks. Beyond the magazine and the Institute, her reach as an expert extended to an advisory role on the Committee of the Household Appliance Section of the London Chamber of Commerce. Women working in the magazine industry were therefore highly influential and had the economic power to impact change at high levels of government.

Good Housekeeping's architectural features were chosen by the Director of Housing, firstly Herbert Welch, one of the architects of the Hampstead Garden Suburb, who was succeeded by the architect Robert Springett; male experts prescribing a new kind of modern for a new kind of woman. It is interesting to note that Housing was the only field in the magazine to be directed by men, unlike, for example, the fashion pages. However, in February 1935 the magazine appointed Joyce Townsend as the new Director of Housing. Townsend was one of the second cohort of women who attended the Architectural Association in 1918. In practice, she worked on slum re-settlement projects, factory and hospital buildings, and almshouses for women. Whilst the content of the pages remained largely unchanged, a full-page spread in the magazine introducing Townsend celebrated her credentials and network, including election as an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects and as a founding member of their Women Architect's Committee, a group created to advocate for equality in the profession (Romanip-James, 1935, p. 66).

Through these professional networks facilitated by the working spaces of the magazine, women acquired social, cultural, and economic capital, but *Good Housekeeping* also promoted these possibilities to its readership, against the backdrop of changing employment and family norms. The interwar period saw dramatic changes in women's education and access to the written word, opening up a new generation of readers and consumers of print culture across all classes (McAleer, 1992, p. 12). Cynthia White (1970) identified 55 new women's magazines appearing between 1920–1939, the majority for lower-middle and middle-class readerships, with Hackney describing *Good Housekeeping* as 'one of the publications of choice' for the comfortably middle-class demographic (Hackney, 2008, p. 117). The value that *Good Housekeeping* placed on the design of the home reflected changes in the built environment, where home ownership 'above all else, became a marker of middle-class identity', with large numbers coming from the expanding readership of 'popular women's and consumer magazines' (Hackney & Bigham, 2022, p. 107).

The readers of *Good Housekeeping* were a network in and of themselves, interacting with the magazine and each other in various ways. As previously discussed, the magazine's tone addressed the expertise of readers, treating them as educated professionals capable of, for example, deciphering architectural floorplans and complex

household budgeting. More directly, letters from readers were published in every issue, albeit selected by the Editor. The 'Health Questionnaire', for example, in which a doctor responded to readers' letters regarding medical questions, became a regular feature throughout the 1930s. These penned interactions provide some insight into the geographical range of the *Good Housekeeping* readership: from London and the Home Counties to the northern reaches of Britain, and into countries under colonial control. A competition run in the magazine in June 1937 encouraged readers to cite instances in which they had 'careers chosen, businesses started and homes equipped as a result of articles read in the magazine', with prize-winners located in across Britain, as well as Guyana (at the time under colonial control as British Guiana) and Bulgaria (p. 202).

As well as interacting through the pages of the magazine, the *Good Housekeeping* readership had the unique ability to network in the magazine's physical space of its Institute. Located on Wellington Street off The Strand in Central London, the Good Housekeeping Institute provided a space in which women could meet, learn about new products, and trial new designs. It was open to visitors on weekday afternoons or by appointment and ran special events such as its cookery school. In an article published in September 1933, Cottington-Taylor, the Institute's Director, remarked that 'both readers and members of the general public continue to make the fullest possible use of the organisation' (Cottington-Taylor, 1933, p. 42). As with the magazine, the Institute adopted the language of scientific management and industrial rationalisation to create a 'culinary laboratory', tapping into the discourse of domestic science popularised in America by figures such as Christine Frederick and in Germany by designers including Lilly Reich and the Austrian architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky; promoting the image of the home as a domestic factory and the housewife's role as a profession (Garbutt, 1936, p. 52). Challenging the traditional idea of science as a male space, Cottington-Taylor's Institute 'laboratory' was run by women, for women. Cottington-Taylor herself could be viewed as the ideal *Good Housekeeping* reader: middle-class, married yet retaining independence, and a professional who was serious about her role as a manager of her home.

Beyond the pages of the magazine, the *Good Housekeeping* readership also formed a wider network of shoppers, reflecting the changing power of interwar women as consumers. Katie Lloyd Thomas (2020) posited that new roles for women as patrons and shoppers allowed them to participate in, and influence debates about, the built environment and the development of new design languages. Lloyd Thomas noted that the cultural identification of shopping with femininity may explain why architectural histories have in the past overlooked this development, preferring instead the image of the designer as separate from the consumer (p. 131). This consumer network of women can also be applied to Jessica Kelly's (2022) concept of 'the architectural public': a market of interwar consumers of architecture who were interested in, but not necessarily experts of, design and therefore sought specialist opinions as to what to buy (p. 14). Although Kelly's concept addressed the readership of *The Architectural Review*, this newly commercialised side of architecture presented questions which reached beyond the architectural press, such as to how to persuade the public what constituted the new 'good taste'. By framing shopping as an intrinsic part of women's interwar citizenship, *Good Housekeeping* mediated ideas of good taste in new architecture and design products for its network of modern readers.

DESIGNS FOR SOCIAL EQUALITY: WOMEN'S MAGAZINES AND MODERNITY

Through these networks of production and consumption, *Good Housekeeping* became a mouthpiece for modernity. In its opening year, it had circulation figures of 150,000 and described itself as having 'treble the sale of any other shilling woman's magazine' on the cover of the February 1923 issue. The magazine's success is demonstrable of the period's 'democratisation of publishing', which saw the large-scale production of magazines and gave new power to women as readers and consumers (Wood, 2016, p. 39). The women's magazine boom of the interwar period presented multifaceted texts featuring high and low cultural subjects, adding to contemporary anxieties surrounding the threat mass culture posed to authentic high culture, but also subversively situating modernism within feminised culture, contravening previously gendered cultural boundaries and representing an 'important site of resistance against gendered discourses' (Wood, 2016, p. 59).⁵ Catherine Clay (2018) noted how magazines of this period provided women with new opportunities to consume modernism in its various forms, arguing that 'modernism was more firmly embedded in the everyday concerns of middle-class, female readers of the interwar period than is generally recognised' (p. 11).

Earlier studies of women's experiences in interwar Britain concluded that magazines promoted 'only one desirable image...that of housewife and mother' (Beddoe, 1989, p. 8) and a 'return to dear housewifeliness' (White, 1970, p. 100) following the blurring of traditional gender roles during the First World War. Adrian Bingham (2004) argued that there was no revolution in gender relations during the interwar era but nevertheless conceded that the period 'cannot simply be regarded as an era of domesticity and retreat', but one that saw the

⁵ Interwar women's magazines' promoted middlebrow content, defined by Faye Hammill as a: 'productive, affirmative standpoint for writers who were not wholly aligned with either high modernism or popular culture' and one which sought to construct readers as culturally literate with a variety of interests, see Hammill, 2007, p. 6.

development of a 'self-consciously 'modern' femininity that drew upon real changes' (p. 233). Closer analysis of *Good Housekeeping* challenges these previous conceptions and reveals a more complex, multifaceted, and sometimes contradictory, interwar woman.

Referencing Raymond Williams's theory that 'the complexity of culture...is to be found...in the dynamic interrelations at every point in the process, of historically varied and variable elements' (1977, p. 121), Brooker and Thacker argued that the relationships between periodicals and the hegemonic mainstream are active and constantly in a process of transformation (p. 17). *Good Housekeeping* presented pluralities of modernity for its audience, featuring the 'variable elements' of which Williams spoke. Different and changing views were printed, capturing both progressive and conservative ideas and demonstrating how ideas of modern womanhood were in a constant state of flux. Articles by leading feminists, such as the politician Violet Bonham-Carter on 'The Political Future of Women' (1922, p. 11) and the barrister Helena Normanton on 'Wages for Wives' (1928, p. 35), sat alongside romantic fiction and the latest fashions, revealing its readers to be nuanced and capable of navigating different social, political, and cultural contexts. These articles often clashed with one another, encouraging readers to engage critically with differing views and contradictions of modern life. These differing perspectives on women's identities demonstrate, as Alice Wood (2018) described, the 'danger of homogenising accounts of the ideology and content' of interwar magazines (p. 223).

Magazines promoted a new kind of citizenship for women, 'transforming and multiplying the ways in which women's gender identities could be constructed' (Clay et al., 2018, p. 2). The highbrow and lowbrow, the intellectual and popular, the progressive and traditional, were not oppositional, and readerships were not forced into being one or the other, but rather multifaceted participants negotiating different iterations of female modernity and citizenship. This is illustrated in *Good Housekeeping's* architectural pages, which provided space for discussions on changing social equality in terms of ways of living.

The loss of men during the War created a 'surplus' (Nicholson, 2008) of women who, through new employment opportunities, could also be independent wage earners, and were a central feature to the experience of interwar womanhood, as well as a key reader demographic of magazines such as *Good Housekeeping*.⁶ This 'surplus' – or 'bachelor girls' as they came to be known in the press – lived independently or with each other, and opened up debates in new ways and new places for living, presenting a challenge to traditional models of women graduating from the homes of their fathers to the homes of their husbands upon marriage.

Good Housekeeping regularly ran features advising single women who chose to live together; detailing methods by which to effectively run the household of home-sharers. As advocated by Cottington-Taylor, the home should be run by a manager. The article 'Living Together' from July 1922 described the running of a bachelor girls' home as 'business-like' and a partnership: 'The most satisfactory method is for one [woman] to sign the lease, and make herself responsible for all out-goings...Strict weekly accounts must be kept and both women go over them, the junior partner paying her share' (Leigh, 1922, p. 35). It was not just practical advice that the magazine imparted, but also ways to design and decorate flats for women to share. The article 'Symphony in Two Colour Schemes' from November 1930, which coincided with the Bachelor Girls Exhibition held in London the same month, detailed 'a flat decorated and furnished for a pair of bachelor girls' (Byrd, 1930, p. 29). Acknowledging that 'the lot of the bachelor girl is often hard', the article's recommendations would ensure that 'the flat...should prove comfortable and perfectly simple to run and keep in order' (pp. 28, 154).

The high proportion of content concerned with married life and motherhood featured in *Good Housekeeping* magazine perhaps supports arguments that the bachelor girl lifestyle was only ever intended as a temporary state; that working life was primarily 'a preparation for marriage' (Holden, 2007, p. 13). In her study of girls' magazines of the period, Tinkler (1995) noted that 'there were no popular bachelor *women* or spinsters in these magazines' (p. 135). However, some bachelor girls of the 1920s did become bachelor women in the 1930s, due to, for example, the numbers of single women, the need to work, and the implementation of marriage bars in many professions.⁷ This shift can be seen in *Good Housekeeping*, where articles from the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s featured more permanent spaces for single women.

Alice Baines's article, 'The Scandal of English Flats', published in May 1929, illustrates this shift in discussions by looking at city flats as a housing type suited to the bachelor woman who wanted a space of her own with more stability and longevity. Baines noted that 'Bachelors, both men and women, want flats because they are sick to death of living in boarding-houses or hotels' (Baines, 1929, p. 36). She praised the use of steel, concrete and glass in apartment building projects in Europe, and questioned 'why cannot middle-class people of average income in this country have flats that are labour-saving and contain the amenities of life, like their compeers in

⁶ The articles discussed from *Good Housekeeping* cover a middle-class experience of the bachelor girl lifestyle. Many working-class women's magazines reflected on the economic hardships and social isolation of single life. See, for example, Nicholson's discussion of *Woman's Weekly* magazine (216–218)

⁷ Holden discusses this in relation to popular careers for middle-class women, such as teaching, nursing, and the civil service (38–42)

the cities of the United States and Canada?’ (Baines, 1929, p. 36). Seven years on, in the article ‘Small Homes in the Heart of London’, Elizabeth White (1936) made similar calls for convenience. In describing a newly completed block of flats in Clifford’s Inn in central London, she noted how they: ‘appeal firstly to the many busy professional men and women who live out of town and who can ill spare the long and tiring hours spent in travelling backwards and forwards’, and went on to highlight the modern amenities: central heating, constant hot water, housemaid and valet services, a restaurant on site (p. 30).

These themes of comfortable and convenient living for professional single women appeared beyond editorial content and into advertising; a technique of value and meaning-making discussed earlier. A description of the Clifford’s Inn flats was closely paralleled in an advertisement featured in *Good Housekeeping*’s January 1934 issue for Sloane Avenue Mansions. This building was an 11-storey apartment block in the Chelsea area of London, designed by George Kay Green and opened the previous year. The advertisement drew attention to the block’s modern technology, ease, and suitability for professionals: Small, Convenient, Inexpensive! You are invited to inspect the most modern, best appointed, labour-saving small flats in central London. Ideal homes for the businessman or woman; an ideal pied-a-terre for the country resident. Electric lights; telephone for each flat; garages for residents’ cars; central heating; constant hot water; private balconies...dainty kitchenette and tiled bathroom included’ (p. 127).

The plurality and nuances of the magazine’s changing readership and its ongoing inclusion of single women was reflected in its wider discussions on living arrangements. For example, to be a modern single woman did not mean that one had to live in the city. The article ‘Between Moor & Sea: A Bachelor Girl’s Home’ from April 1929 showcased a ‘real life’ home. As the domain of a single woman, like the Clifford’s Inn flat, the article detailed a minimal way of living: ‘being a bachelor girl’s home, the accommodation needed was not great; a living-room, kitchen, the usual domestic offices, two single bedrooms for herself and her maid, and a spare bedroom for an occasional guest being sufficient’ (Clifford Hollis, 1929, p. 55). However, the owner’s desire to live both in the countryside and by the sea dominated the discussion. The magazine reflected the realities of those who did not fulfil the caricature of the urban bachelor girl and looked beyond stereotypes to present a myriad of ways that the modern woman could live.

The outsourcing of domestic labour forms a common thread throughout these articles, whether through devices, on-site catering, or housemaid services (live-in and live-out). Despite prophesising in its first issue that labour-saving technologies would create ‘educated classes...independent of domestic help’, *Good Housekeeping* remained engaged throughout the interwar period with the ‘servant problem’ in its advice (Author unknown, 1922, p. 11). As Lucy Delap (2011) noted, labour-saving devices did not translate into a simple move away from employing domestic labour, despite *Good Housekeeping*’s predictions to the contrary (p. 118). Reflecting shifts in the class system of interwar Britain, the magazine acknowledged that whilst managing a fleet of domestic help was no longer viable for the majority of middle-class households, complete servantlessness was also rare. Although more domestic work was taken on by middle-class women as a result of these shifts, there remained a clear divide in terms of ‘respectable’ versus ‘rough’ tasks (p. 126). Cooking, for example, gradually became acceptable for middle-class women as it was aligned with the ‘daintiness’ seen as a key part of femininity, a term echoed in the ‘dainty kitchenette’ featured in the Sloane Avenue Mansions flats (p. 121). Designs for social equality, as communicated through architecture for single working people on the pages of *Good Housekeeping*, were therefore more concerned with equality in terms of gender; equality for working women across classes was more problematic.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, women’s magazines can offer unique reflections on women’s experiences of modernity, helping new histories to emerge that position women as key figures in the production, promotion, and consumption of modern architecture in Britain in the interwar era. Through an exploration of these sources we can identify a much more complex figure of the interwar woman in Britain than previously assumed. By looking ‘beyond the built’ at architecture in word and image, we can consider the ways in which women influenced and shaped modern design, and highlight the importance of the intricate networks of collaborative practice which are key to feminist revisions of history.

Women’s periodicals such as *Good Housekeeping* advocated for a multiplicity in modern femininity, reflecting the complex and diverse realities of being a woman during a time of social, political, and cultural change. This rethink of design from a female perspective was, however, indicative of the class structures of Britain at the time, and *Good Housekeeping* cannot be taken as representing all magazines or women of the period given its firmly middle-class identity and readership.

The modern woman’s nuances were reflected in the variations across the years of *Good Housekeeping*, but also within single issues, through readers’ negotiations of juxtapositions present in different types of content and form. Readers did not absorb content in a uniform or straightforward way but rather could employ different and

new ways of looking to construct meaning, informed by an increasingly visual culture and developments in the graphic design of magazines. It is due to this complex, contradictory, and ever-changing set of relationships that periodicals offer a unique means through which to consider multiple feminine modernities.

The writers and editors of *Good Housekeeping* magazine, working within the boundaries of a male-controlled society and for a magazine company presided over by men, initiated a rethinking of architecture and design, creating a space for discussion about modern design and the modern woman. Their positionality as women writing for women encouraged social participation in the magazine's readership to engage both on the page and off. By giving a voice to women in what had until that point been traditionally male spheres of wage-earning work, science, and architecture, *Good Housekeeping* magazine challenged ideas of the male expert and featured design which would appeal to the needs and wants of women.

Through analysis of the space and form, networks, and the sites of production and consumption of women's magazines, new perspectives on domestic modernity and women's roles within it can be evidenced. The relationship between editorial and commercial content within magazines, and the various possible identities that this created for women, show that she was a much more complex figure than just a suburban housewife, and had an active role in demanding modern changes in the home.

Acknowledgement

This paper is based on research presented by the author at the conference "Women Designing and Planning for Social Equality: A political and feminist reading of practitioners' commitment to rethink practice, question theory and take space" (June 2024), organized by Maria Silvia D'Avolio and Andri Gerber and sponsored by the ZHAW Institut Urban Landscape and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).

Funding

The author reports that no external funding was received for this research.

Ethical statement

The author reports that no ethical statement was necessary for this article.

Competing interests

The author reports that there are no competing interests for this article.

Author contributions

The author was responsible for the research and manuscript preparation.

Data availability

The author reports that there is no data available for this article.

AI disclosure

The author reports that no AI was used for composing this article.

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Research paper

Encounters, Affective Anecdotes, and the Archive: Traveling with Emilie von Berlepsch to Scotland

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

Citation: Rieger, E. (2026). Encounters, affective anecdotes, and the archive: Traveling with Emilie von Berlepsch to Scotland. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(2), Article 25. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/19073>

Published: August 27, 2026

ABSTRACT

This article explores a feminist, embodied approach to architectural historiography through a re-enactment of Emilie von Berlepsch's (1755-1830) travels to Scotland in 1799-1800. In 2023, I retraced part of her route and reread selected passages aloud on site, treating both her historical encounter and my contemporary one as architectural evidence. Focusing on St. Martin's Abbey near Perth, where Berlepsch stayed for a period, the article weaves historical analysis with personal, creative writing, which I call *affective anecdotes*. These anecdotes register frictions, breakdowns, and failed attempts to 'follow' her footsteps that shaped my encounters with sites and archives. They function as protocols of affects that conventional, rigorous academic writing cannot accommodate, and, in doing so, they call into question the conditions under which architectural knowledge is produced. I argue that Berlepsch's travel writing offers a situated architectural critique grounded in routine, movement, and use, evaluating domestic space through the daily routes it demands and through the gendered and classed spatial organization. By placing Berlepsch's eighteenth-century critique alongside my own embodied encounters, the article interrogates the persistent assumption of the disembodied researcher in architectural historiography. Discomfort functions as an analytic and methodological lens across both temporalities, not to collapse them, but to make visible the asymmetries of access, expectation, and epistemic authority and to rethink how architectural histories are written.

Keywords: architectural historiography, encounters, affective anecdotes, embodiment

Between 1799 and 1800, Emilie von Berlepsch, a German aristocratic writer, traveled to Scotland and the Scottish Highlands to follow the traces of Ossian, a purported Gaelic poet associated with a celebrated cycle of epic poems. Her primary goal was to gather evidence supporting the existence of the poet, whose works had stirred controversy over their authenticity (Shields, 2010, p. 24). Berlepsch published her experiences in *Caledonia*, initially planned as a three-volume work but ultimately released in four volumes between 1802 and 1804 (Berlepsch, 1802a, 1802b, 1803, 1804).¹ This was the first German travel account of the Scottish Highlands and Berlepsch's first comprehensive publication on travel writing (Bär, 2013, p. 343).

¹ Berlepsch was partly accompanied by the Gaelic-speaking James Macdonald, whom she had met in Weimar. *Caledonia* was dedicated to Johann Gottfried Herder, whom she saw as her mentor. (Berlepsch, 1802a, pp. vii,xi).

Caledonia was based on diary entries, letters, essays, and conversations with people she encountered. She also discussed English and Scottish literature, including legends (Scheitler, 1999, p. 136). She offered statistical information about cities, discussed infrastructure, resources, and legal matters such as tenantry, and combined these with romantic descriptions of landscapes, castles, and estates, focusing on the sublime and its affect. *Caledonia* was widely read in Germany, and cultural historian Michael Maurer credits Berlepsch as the starting point for the reception of Scotland in Germany (Maurer, 2006, p. 53).

This paper focuses on one specific site discussed in *Caledonia*, St. Martin's Abbey near Perth, where Berlepsch stayed with her friend Cecilia Macdonald, and from where she wrote small parts of her book. Since Berlepsch lived in this house for a period, she became familiar with its layout by repeatedly walking through it. These everyday acts of walking through the house, her spatial practice, informed Berlepsch and enabled her to discuss and critique the general floor plan organization of British houses by sketching the daily routes of the female inhabitants. I understand this critique based on movement and everyday practices as 'architectural evidence' (Chee, 2023, p. 6).

In 2023, I retraced her journey. On site, I read relevant passages of *Caledonia* to immerse myself in the environments she encountered more than 200 years earlier and to attune my attention to the spatial features, routes, and atmospheres she foregrounds, in order to trace continuities, transformations, and losses across time. In practice, however, this attunement failed repeatedly. It presumed comparability between her encounter and mine, a symmetry of bodies. Physical barriers, logistics, and the limits of my own body repeatedly disrupted the effort to encounter the landscape through her account. Rather than collapsing two temporalities, the re-enactment exposed their asymmetries. It shifted my attention from recovering Berlepsch's encounter to analyzing the disruptions that shaped my experience, and to asking what such breakdowns mean for writing this architectural history.

This paper operates at two analytical levels. Its primary level is historical: Following Lilian Chee, I read Berlepsch's travel writing as an account of 'affective encounters', which Chee argues are central to architectural epistemology and should be treated as 'architectural evidence' (Chee, 2023, p. 6). It reads Berlepsch's travel writing as architectural knowledge that emerges through experiences, movement, routine, and perception. A second, reflexive level addresses the conditions under which this kind of evidence is produced and interpreted. Feminist scholarship has long argued that knowledge is situated and that epistemic authority is unevenly distributed (Alcoff, 1999; Haraway, 1988). The question of whose accounts are trusted reveals that epistemic reliability is not only gendered but also depends on the social location constituted by class, race, gender, ability, and other intersecting identities. As Elizabeth Grosz has argued, the subject is corporal; its specifics cannot be neutralized away (Grosz, 1994, p. ix). This raises a guiding question for the paper: what role do bodily experiences and affect play in the production of architectural knowledge and in the writing of architectural historiographies?

Reading Berlepsch through this lens foregrounds the body as fundamental to knowledge production and considers her account as architectural evidence arising from situated, affective encounters. At the same time, this paper reflects on the assumption of a disembodied researcher by attending to the discrepancy between expectations and the lived realities of the research process. To do so, it introduces *affective anecdotes* as an exploratory methodological approach rather than a stabilized or generalized method. They offer a space in which frictions, failures, and unmet expectations can be registered. They disrupt the rigorous academic writing process and serve to reintegrate the researcher's concrete body into it. These considerations guide my analysis, which, after outlining the methodological framing, moves from my 2023 encounter with St. Martin's Abbey to a historical analysis of Berlepsch's lived experience in 1800.

RE-ENACTMENT AND AFFECTIVE ANECDOTES

*Daughter of the distant land,
The dweller of the secret cell!
Do I hear the whispering of the groves,
Or the voice of your song?*²

When Emilie von Berlepsch traveled to Scotland in 1799, she was on a mission. She followed Ossian to the Scottish Highlands to gather evidence of his authenticity (Schmidt, 2003, p. 281). In the quote above, drawn from one of Ossian's poems, 'The Battle of Lora' (Ossian, 1762, p. 111), Berlepsch, while on-site, transforms the

² 'Tochter des fernen Landes, der heimlichen Zelle Bewohnerin! Hör' ich das Säuseln der Haine, oder die Stimme deines Gesangs?' (Berlepsch, 1803, Vol. 3, p. 124)

narrative by reimagining it through her own voice. Specifically, she creates space for herself by changing the addressee from the original ‘son’ to ‘daughter,’ thereby imagining Ossian speaking directly to her. She states:

(...) I only needed to change the sex in the first and in a few other lines and give myself over to the beautiful illusion as if the splendid old man, whose image I had lovingly contemplated again, was sitting in front of me with his harp and talking to me.³

By situating herself in the poem’s environment – caves, groves, and mountain streams – she overcame the temporal and geographical distances, transforming a distant past into an embodied and personal encounter through these acts.

This practice of reciting on site, through which Berlepsch brought the past into her present, was the starting point for my re-enactment of her experiences. I wanted to revisit the sites Berlepsch had encountered on her journey to Scotland, follow her footsteps if possible, and reread the relevant passages aloud to, on the one hand, transform the place before my inner eye into its 1800 appearance and, on the other hand, pull Berlepsch from the past to the present and to my side. Berlepsch was my travel companion as much as Ossian, among other Scottish writers, was hers.

Part of this method is inspired by architectural historian Emma Cheatle and her method to ‘materialize’ the English writer Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797). In ‘Between Landscape and Confinement’, Cheatle states that ‘(...) it is almost as though she stands at my shoulder as I read’ (Cheatle, 2017, p. 67). I took this quite literally and let Berlepsch speak through my voice at the site she described 200 years ago. To imagine Wollstonecraft walking by her side and to connect on a personal level, Cheatle wrote ‘love letters’ on the back of postcards (Cheatle 2017, p. 67). She states that these letters are situated ‘between fact and fiction, walking and writing’ to ‘change the pace, temporality, place, and script of the essay’ (Cheatle 2017, pp. 75, 77). Following Cheatle, I wrote letters to Berlepsch from my hotel rooms, libraries, archives, or nearby cafés, sometimes echoing her language and at other times attempting to write my own travel account. But the majority of my letters were not love letters, because what I experienced totally clashed with my expectations shaped by Berlepsch’s vivid descriptions of landscapes and architecture. Instead of love letters, the majority of my writings were saturated with frustration due to the limitations of my body. I captured these frustrations, my embodied responses to the sites and the discomfort of navigating unfamiliar spaces, as what I call *affective anecdotes*.

These *affective anecdotes* became a crucial tool for capturing my ‘affective encounters’. Architectural historian Lilian Chee argues that ‘affective encounters’ are central to architectural epistemology and should be recognized as a form of ‘architectural evidence’ (Chee, 2023, p. 6). She asks, ‘What happens when these sticky entities are admitted into architectural discourse?’ With sticky entities, she refers to forms of ‘affective evidence’ such as anecdotes, stories, situations, and field notes usually not considered in the traditional architectural historiography (Chee 2023, pp. 19–20). For Chee, such admissions acknowledge that knowledge gained from encounters is both imaginative and situated, and that this tension is critical ‘to embodying architectural history within a lived contemporary milieu’ (Chee, 2023, p. 5).

In Queer Phenomenology, for instance, Sara Ahmed explores how bodies are oriented in space, how social norms shape what feels familiar or at home, and how non-normative bodies disrupt these spatial and social arrangements (Ahmed, 2006). The disruption does not occur through mere presence but through the body’s encounter with spatial and social arrangements that were never designed to accommodate it. The built environment materializes politics; it disciplines bodies through its norms. The frictions or discrepancies between disciplining architecture and bodies are registered as affects, revealing how power operates through space. In my own creative writing, such affects are recorded as *affective anecdotes*, which document how the built environment acts upon the body. Affect, registered through these encounters and documented in the *affective anecdotes*, plays a constitutive role in the ‘production of knowledge and subjects’ (Stephens, 2015, p. 274).

My anecdotes are such affective evidence of how architectural knowledge is negotiated and recorded through the body. They document the friction between expectation and reality and offer a space to reflect on my body’s limitations and how this shaped my experience of the environment. They record how the past persists materially and affectively, revealing the frictions, failures, and accommodations through which architectural knowledge is produced. The affective anecdotes that emerge from such embodied re-enactment constitute the primary method of this study. While experience, either of Berlepsch’s in the past or mine in the present, is mediated through writing, the affective anecdotes are an attempt not to fall into the mode of mediation and instead follow a more diary-like format. Nevertheless, mediation cannot be avoided entirely. Ultimately, it is a translation of an affective encounter into text.

³ ‘(...) weil ich nur nöthig hatte in der ersten und in ein paar andern Zeilen, das Geschlecht zu verändern, und mich der schönen Täuschung zu überlassen, als säße der treffliche Greis, dessen Bild ich wieder liebend betrachtete, mit seiner Harfe vor mir und rede mich an.’ (Berlepsch, 1803, Vol. 3, p. 123)

The dominant affect of my research trip was discomfort. Rachele Chadwick describes discomfort as ‘an affective intensity’ that ‘can dis/orient researchers in particular (...) ways, potentially opening up or closing down questions and lines of inquiry’ (Chadwick, 2021, p. 2). Affective intensities can ‘trouble master narratives and conventional forms of critique’ (Fullagar & Bozalek, 2021, p. 26). I too was troubled and was forced to rethink and recalibrate what I had intended with this trip, how to sit with the clash, friction, and discrepancy between the idealized theoretical approach and the realities of physically encountering these spaces. Melissa Carr argues that ‘discomfort provides a juncture that illuminates regimes of truth and power and allows reflection on how subjectivity is constituted in research’ (Carr, 2025, p. 1). While both Chadwick and Carr discuss discomfort in the context of qualitative research, I treat discomfort as an analytical tool within the field of architecture: Discomfort points to the politics of space: who is accommodated, oriented, and who is rendered out of place, who must constantly adjust.

Chadwick and Carr turn to creative writing to document their affects; I similarly turn to *anecdotes* as a space where these ‘undisciplined’ feelings, the messiness of affect, sometimes not yet precisely grasped, can exist outside the constraints of what is considered academic writing. These creative writings can take different forms: diary entries, poetry, and experimental texts. Where academic writing necessitates structured thoughts and arguments, creative writing is a place where you can put everything, where writing, as Audre Lorde captured so precisely when discussing poetry, ‘(...) help[s] give name to the nameless so it can be thought’ (Lorde, 2019, p. 25).

If discomfort signals how power operates through affect, Iris Marion Young helps to think through how power is lived through the body. Her concept of the ‘body-in-situation’ connects structure and experience. Young defines the ‘lived body’ as ‘a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context (...) Her specific body lives in a specific context (...)’ (Young, 2005, p. 16). This framework insists that the political, social, and cultural context we embody, including class, race, gender, and ability, influences which experiences are available, what we attend to, how we orient ourselves, and the blind spots we have. Importantly, this is not neutral reciprocity between body and environment but a negotiation under uneven conditions, in which we constantly adjust our behavior in response to spatial and social cues, especially when a space or situation appears hostile or exclusionary. Affective states, such as fear and desire, as well as contingent circumstances, such as weather, crowd, and time of day, further mediate our orientation. ‘Body-in-situation’, as I use it, acknowledges this entangled mesh of structural and affective relations.

While I employ different concepts, the letters from Cheate, Chee’s approach to affective encounters as architectural evidence, and re-enactment as a way of inserting myself on site, my methodology is embedded in critical feminist theory. At its core, it draws from Black feminist scholarship, which has long modeled how personal narrative functions not as self-expression but as a method: beginning with embodied experiences, sharing anecdotes not as endpoints but as entry points that open toward the collective and the structural. Christina Sharpe includes the personal to tell a story that engages with and counters the violence of abstraction (Sharpe, 2016, p. 8). Her refusal of abstractions informs how I understand my affects captured in the anecdotes as an analytical lens. Patricia Hill Collins begins *Black Feminist Thought* with an autobiographical memory, and explains later that ‘the voice that I now seek is both individual and collective, personal and political, one reflecting the intersection of my unique biography with the larger meaning of my historical times’ (Collins, 2002, p. 8).⁴ This assertion, that personal narrative can serve as a bridge between lived experience and structural critique, guides how I understand my own methodology.

My approach, which includes re-enactments and affective anecdotes, also exposes the assumptions embedded in the research process. It grapples with the realities and expectations of research practices, such as archival research and site visits. It asks what happens when our expectations are unmet or we ‘fail’ to find evidence. Confronted with the realities of my research trip, I realized that my methodological approach implicitly assumed an able-bodied person. This assumption stands in stark contrast to my own experience as someone who struggles with mobility. Moving through landscapes and built environments brings particular uncertainty and anxiety: Can my body manage, and if not, what will I do? How can I avoid such situations or handle them when I’m unable to? How do I work as an architectural historian? How do I do productive research? While navigating a familiar

⁴ Learning from this genealogy also means acknowledging the limitations of my own position. My use of affective anecdotes does not carry the same survival stakes or proximity to violence as those experienced by racialized people. Yet different forms of oppression are not separate from these genealogies but are rooted in anti-Blackness: the organizing logic that not only structures racism but also anti-fatness, and capitalism (Harrison, 2021; Strings, 2019). Writing from my situated body does not equate my experience with that of racialized people; instead, I must acknowledge that some bodies, including my own, are disciplined within systems of convenience and accommodation, while others are rendered disposable or erased altogether. This informs the boundaries of my perspective and situates my embodied research within the unequal conditions that make it possible.

space with established routines, I am aware of how much energy each activity consumes. In an unfamiliar setting, it becomes a gamble that requires foresight, extra preparation, a backup plan, and increased awareness of our bodies. Ellen Samuels, through her notion of *Crip time*, articulates this re-examination and increased awareness concerning the body poignantly:

(...) it requires us to break in our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking, feeling and moving through the world. It forces us to take breaks, even when we don't want to, even when we want to keep going, to move ahead. It insists that we listen to our bodyminds so closely, so attentively (...) (Samuels, 2017).

While I advocate for a method of re-enactment, I am also critical of it. As Laura L. Ellingson reminds us, all 'knowledge is produced not by the disembodied voices (...) but by researchers, whose bodies unavoidably influence all aspects of the research process' (Ellingson, 2006, p. 298). In practice, discomfort, anxiety, and accessibility complicate this approach. Rather than viewing my mobility issues as hindrances, I frame them as a critical lens through which to engage with landscapes, architecture, and their histories. Alison Kafer urges a similar shift in perspective away from understanding disability as an individual problem located in certain bodies and minds and towards recognizing that 'the problem is located in inaccessible buildings (...)' (Kafer, 2013, p. 6). The built environment becomes an instrument of discipline, naturalizing the exclusion of non-normative bodies. As Elizabeth Mohr, Kimberly Jamie, and Hester Hockin-Boyers note, 'this sense of non-belonging is actively reproduced through the policing of non-conforming bodies in public space' (Mohr et al., 2025, p. 3).

While lived experiences, captured through *affective anecdotes*, are central to my methodology, they are neither universal nor just personal. Instead, they reveal power relations, exclusions, and moments of friction. Crucially, I do not use experience to depoliticize. As Robin Truth Goodman warns, experience can be mobilized within a neoliberal framework '(...) abstracting experience from its social context and deploying it in a competitive discursive arena in which historical dynamics, social contexts, and structural power relations are obscured.' (Goodman, 2019, p. 150). I am particularly concerned with how discourses around embodiment in academia often presume an able-bodied subject. Such an approach obscures the multiple intersectional ways in which bodies navigate the world, shaped not only by individual circumstances but also by structural conditions such as race, class, gender, and ability. Garland-Thomson argues that race and gender are now central to the analysis in feminist theory, but disability is often overlooked (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p. 2).

Ultimately, the *affective anecdotes* depart from personal reflection, and they point toward systemic and institutional structures of exclusion. The limitations of my own body, the discomfort, the anxiety, and the restrictions are integral to my experience and cannot be ignored in writing architectural history. They offer a way to bring the embodied and affective experiences of the researcher into conversation, transforming historiography from a static exercise into a living, dynamic engagement with the built environment.

DIS / COMFORT

My encounters are often shaped by discomfort, insecurity, and a sense of being out of place. Chadwick argues to work with these affects, she writes: 'the politics of discomfort can function as a useful feminist methodological and epistemic strategy' (Chadwick, 2021, p. 2). One key moment of friction became apparent during my visit to the archive of the Historic Environment of Scotland in Edinburgh. Here, I hoped to find a specific drawing of St. Martin's Abbey before its alteration and extension, to give me an idea of the space that Berlepsch experienced and critiqued. Instead, I was confronted with a low-resolution, grainy scan of the image. I became fixated because it was the only concrete piece of evidence I could cling to, and to justify my plan to visit the house to ask if I could see the drawing. The archivist gave me the address, and my supervisor wrote me a letter of recommendation. I was, in hindsight, painfully naïve to believe I could simply go to the house, ring the doorbell, and hand over my request. But I went anyway.

This story starts with an anecdote, and this anecdote begins with a photograph I could not take and a drawing I could not understand. I set out to visit St. Martin's Abbey, determined to see the house where Emilie von Berlepsch once stayed, but the house refused to reveal itself to me.

Last November, during a research trip to Scotland, I arrived in Perth with a plan: visit the archives and see St. Martin's Abbey, where Berlepsch had once resided. My previous archive visits to Edinburgh were not as fruitful as I had hoped. Therefore, I wanted to speak with the owner of the house to ask about a specific drawing I had found in the Historic Environment of Scotland archive. The first challenge was getting there. The closest bus stop was still too far for me to walk. A cab then.

At the hotel reception, I was given a phone and three phone numbers for different taxi companies. Both companies hung up on me after they could not understand my request due to the bad telephone connection. I did not even try to call the third one. I tried Uber, but it does not exist in Perth. The receptionist recommended waiting further down the road at the cab stop. So, I did. I stood there for 10 minutes, which felt like ages. I got nervous, I had a tight schedule, and today was the only day I could see St. Martin's Abbey. Then, finally, a cab! I

showed the taxi driver a piece of paper with the address of the house that I got from the archivist in Edinburgh. It was a 15-minute drive. On our way, he told me he was from Libya but had lived in Perth for a long time. 'I like it here,' he said. I was not fully convinced; I thought Perth was quite depressing. I told him I was a PhD student and wanted to deliver a letter to the owner of St. Martin's Abbey. He assured me that he would help me.

As we approached the estate, we were stopped by a gate. Even though it was open, it was not welcoming, warning us with a sign that said 'strictly private road'. 'We can go anyway,' my guide told me, but I hesitated since the sign clearly told us otherwise. I stepped out of the car to see if I could find a letterbox. There was none. 'There should be another entrance; let's try that,' I told my guide. On the way, we stopped by a church where I wanted to see the memorial of William Macdonald, the owner of St. Martin's Abbey. On our way there, we passed the second entry to the estate, again a wide-open gate warning us that this is a 'private road'. Less strictly, though. Again, no letter box. I became increasingly nervous; this was not as I had pictured it. I did not expect a vast estate, let alone such a serious marking of private territory. To buy myself some time, I asked the driver to park in front of the church so I could look for the memorial. Of course, the church was closed.

I did not know what to do with myself, so I turned to the graveyard behind the church to look for graves belonging to the Macdonald family. I wanted to find a trace of the family Emilie von Berlepsch visited; I tried to find proof that my archival research was correct, that I was, in fact, in the right place. I found a gravestone of Elizabeth Macdonald, who died in 1932. I felt pressured to go back so as not to let my guide wait too long. In my absence, he had taken me under his wing and spoke on my behalf to people to find help. He thought of my mission as his as well. 'We can enter, it's no problem,' I was still insecure since we had no appointment or legitimacy to enter the strictly private road. But he assured me that it was okay.

It is a beautiful estate, with a little river running through. Part of the estate is forest, and since it was early November, all the trees had different colors. The scenery was very picturesque, and I would have enjoyed the view from the car window very much if I had not been so tense. The small road meandered through the estate. Several times, we came to an intersection, and we had to stop to reorient ourselves. There was no sign of how to get to the house. We arrived at the end of the road, which opened to a turning area. Two smaller roads continued to different areas of the estate, but I could not understand which would lead to the house. I assumed we were quite close to our destination, but I could not see a letterbox. I was also unable to determine the main entrance of the house to look for a doorbell. 'I will walk from this point,' I told my guide, because I did not want him to drive directly to the house; we already had problems with the muddy road, and we were trespassing, after all. I got out of the car and looked around. I saw a tiny part of the house hiding behind huge bushes and trees. Then I saw a woman in the distance, dressed in green, accompanied by two dogs. She carried a basket and walked toward the forest. I imagined her on her way to pick some mushrooms in her grounds.

I thought this was my only chance. Therefore, I shouted in her direction to get her attention. 'Hello, I have a letter!' 'For whom?!' she yelled back. 'For the house owner!' I knew this response was not very satisfying, if at all slightly concerning, since I, a stranger, did not even know the owner's name. The woman began to move in my direction. I also started walking towards her, but I was hesitant because the dogs had started running towards me while barking. Another warning sign. It felt like ages when we finally stood in front of each other. It was an awkward conversation, with me explaining myself, her listening, and sometimes asking one-word questions. She confirmed that her father had provided the Archives of Historic Environment of Scotland with documents related to the history of the house. I explained that this particular drawing, made before the original house was altered, was poorly copied. Therefore, I wanted to contact the house owner to see if they still had this drawing. I further explained that I did not intend to intrude on her private property. I just wanted to leave a letter with my contact details and a letter of recommendation from my supervisor, Anne Hultzsich. Since I did not know the owner's name, I had to deliver the letter by myself. And since I was not able to find a letterbox, I did not know what else to do other than to come to her house. I would have rung the doorbell, but there was none. She took my letter and told me she would look into it.

I took one photo of the house hidden behind the trees and returned to the taxi. I did not dare to ask if I could see the building up close. When I entered the cab, my guide wanted to know how it went. I was unsure, and even though I was successful in my delivery, I felt weird. I told him. I felt like a peasant. The whole trip made me uncomfortable. I do not know exactly what I expected, but not this. Something clearer, something more intuitive. Not all these mechanisms are in place to repel uninvited guests, or people who do not know the drill. I expected it to be way more accessible. I did not know how to navigate these mechanisms of inaccessibility. My whole approach marked me as an outsider: my language, my accent, my insecurity. I had no sense of protocol; I had no permission. My guide comforted me by saying that we did everything we could. And so, we drove back to Perth.

To this day, I have not heard back from the house owner, which is unsurprising given her disinterest during our brief, awkward encounter. So, in one way, I was unsuccessful in my mission. Yet I have written about this affective encounter, and it is this experience that I admit as architectural evidence. So, what did I learn from it?

As it turned out, I was not very well equipped for this trip. I have no knowledge about this kind of wealth I was about to encounter. I know houses with a short driveway and a letterbox, not mansions sitting in vast estates with many confusing roads and multiple entrances. I felt awkward, uneasy, and out of place, not just because I did not understand the codes, the scale, how these estates operate, and the etiquette of navigating such estates, but also because of the limits of my own body. The success of my mission depended entirely on whether I would find someone to drive me there. Public transportation was not an option because the bus stop was too far away for me to walk.

It also made me realize the contingency of this whole encounter. If I had had another taxi driver, one who wasn't as patient and helpful, I probably would have given up. The taxi driver 'reoriented' me and made this mission possible (Ahmed, 2006, p. 157). And if I had not run into the lady of the house on her lawn, maybe I would have made it to the house itself. Or maybe I wouldn't have dared to approach at all.

This experience led me to reflect on the dynamics of privilege and accessibility. Berlepsch, armed with recommendation letters, had no trouble gaining entry to private estates like St. Martin's Abbey. But these recommendation letters came with social obligations that annoyed her. In one instance, she complained that she had to drink tea with the owner of the house while all she wanted was to wander around on their estate. In her writings, she shows little interest in the interiors of these spaces, stating that she 'rarely [had] the curiosity to see the inside of any house unless lured by the expectation of strange paintings.'⁵ Her annoyance stems from a place of privilege, since access was never a concern for her (at least she does not write about it). She had the recommendation letters that literally opened the door for her, but they came with an obligation to socialize. She also depended on social encounters, for example, to gather information about a place and its people. For me, however, access was not guaranteed, and the barriers were far more tangible.

One of the rare instances where Berlepsch does describe a house's interior is her account of St. Martin's Abbey, where she stayed for an extended period to explore the surrounding area. The house belonged to her friend Cecilia Macdonald and her brother William, a lawyer and one of the founders of the Highland Agricultural Society, which worked to preserve the Gaelic language and culture.⁶ William Macdonald bought the property around 1750 and started to build St. Martin's Abbey between 1791 and 1795. Initially, the house was south-facing, with a five-bay façade, double-piled and three stories high. In the 1840s, a chapel was attached to the east of the house, which gave the house its name, St. Martin's Abbey (Scott, 1911, p. 29). During the 1860s, the house underwent significant alterations and expansions, including the reorientation of the entrance to the north (Gifford, 2007, p. 688).

When Berlepsch visited St Martin's Abbey in 1800, she must have seen the original five-bay building. In the archives, I found an old pencil drawing from July 1743. It shows the south façade with an adjacent one-story building on the left. Unfortunately, the pencil is in such poor condition that the details of the façade and the outlines of the building are not identifiable. The lower one-story building, a pavilion, most likely contained the service rooms.

Berlepsch on the meaning of comfort

Throughout *Caledonia*, whenever Berlepsch pauses or settles for a while and gets familiar with a place, she starts to reflect more generally. Therefore, when Berlepsch settles in St. Martin's Abbey, she reflects on her temporary home and describes the daily routes of the female inhabitants of the house. Berlepsch draws on this specific house to discuss the general floor plan organization of British houses and how women navigate their homes. She introduces this topic by reflecting on the word comfortable. She had observed that British people always talk about comfort as the main aim concerning lifestyle and interior. In this reflection, Berlepsch's own feeling of superiority shines through. She questions whether British people understand what comfort entails.

I doubt whether the British know quite definitely and logically what they mean by this [the term comfortable]. If they said efficiency, expediency, or solidity, I would have no objection. I would also allow the English, but by no means the Scots in general, to include cleanliness under the term comfortable.⁷

⁵ 'Ich habe selten die Neugierde, das Innere von irgend einem Hause zu besehen, wenn mich nicht die Erwartung merkwürdiger Gemälde anlockt.' (Berlepsch 1802a, pp.1,89)

⁶ For this information I would like to thank the Local & Family History Team from the A K Bell Library of Culture Perth and Kinross. Email dated September 5, 2023.

⁷ 'Ob die Britten ganz bestimmt und logisch wissen was sie darunter [unter dem Begriff Bequemlichkeit] verstehn, mögte ich bezweifeln. Wenn sie Tüchtigkeit, Zweckmässigkeit, Solidität sagten, so hätte ich nichts dagegen einzuwenden. Den Engländern, aber bey weiten nicht allgemein den Schotten, würde ich auch erlauben, die Reinlichkeit mit unter dem Begriff des comfortable zu verstehn.' (Berlepsch, 1802a, Vol. 1, p. 89).

As we see in this quote above, Berlepsch uses hygiene and comfort as parameters for othering British and Scottish people. To ‘other’ someone involves creating a separation between oneself and those seen as different, placing those ‘others’ in a lower status. This process occurs through the continual use of stereotypes and traits that mark the ‘other’ as deviant or outside the norm. Othering goes beyond mere differences; it reinforces power dynamics, with the dominant group asserting its superiority while positioning those who differ as inferior or subordinate. ‘Others’ are often determined by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion (Gallaher et al., 2009, p. 328). The process of othering is evident in travel writing, which often reflects imperialist attitudes (Thompson, 2011, p. 137). Berlepsch uses comfort, hygiene, and food as parameters for cultural difference and othering. At the same time, she uses her own discomfort in traversing the house layout as a lens to critique it.

In early modern England, comfort was firmly associated with emotional well-being, with a sense of being comfortable and of offering comfort (or consolation) to others. But during the 18th century, it also began to relate to physical comfort (Crowley, 2001, p. x). John Crowley argues that ‘the extent and degree of convenience and comfort among the populace became measures of northwestern Europe’s progress from barbarism to civilization’ (Crowley, 2001, p. 153). Comfort and convenience became markers and part of a rhetoric of progress; therefore, travelers often found the places they visited falling short of their own country’s higher standards (Stobart, 2022, p. 8). For Crowley, this ‘invention of comfort’ was reflected in changing attitudes among householders, as well as a corresponding shift in domestic material culture. These changes included technological innovations designed to make homes warmer, lighter, and better ventilated, along with a broader range of furniture, particularly upholstered furniture like easy chairs and sofas. Moreover, there was a shift in the organization and layout of homes, with a growing emphasis on privacy (Crowley, 2001).

Berlepsch’s reflection on the term comfort and what it entails demonstrates this shift in meaning, even though Berlepsch seems unaware that comfort was initially related to emotional well-being. Instead, she has a top-down attitude towards British and Scottish people. In 1813, Joachim Campe offered a definition of comfort in his *Wörterbuch zur Erklärung und Verdeutschung unserer Sprache* (Dictionary for the Explanation and Germanization of Our Language). He writes that Comfort can be translated as *Gemächlichkeit*, *Bequemlichkeit*, or *Trost*: comfort, convenience, or consolation (Campe, 1813, p. 203). Campe’s definition demonstrates that there was awareness of two different meanings: comfort in a physical sense and comfort related to comforting someone. However, Berlepsch’s understanding of comfort aligns more with *Behaglichkeit*, *Bequemlichkeit*, and *Erquicklichkeit*, which are forms of comfort in a physical sense that relate to ease and joy. Based on her understanding of comfort, she verdicts that ‘their [British] apartments, tone of society, and life apparatus do not seem comfortable to me.’⁸ For example, she draws on St. Martin’s Abbey, the house of her host, Cecilia, which, in Berlepsch’s view, can be seen as representative of all apartments of wealthy, middle-class families.

Berlepsch and the daily routes of women

Berlepsch acknowledges the perfection of the façade, with its partitions, decoration, and use of sandstone, but notes that the way the British apartments are organized on the inside wouldn’t be comfortable for German women. In the following, she describes how the rooms dedicated to women are scattered across the different floors of the building and sketches the routes of the female inhabitants, walking us through them. In relation to the wealth of the building, she argues, it would be very uncomfortable for German women not to inhabit a series of rooms that follow each other. Instead, sleeping quarters are located on the top floor, while the clothes and the equipment for reading, writing, and working are kept on the second floor (Berlepsch, 1803, p. 169).

Her reflections resonate with broader late eighteenth-century architectural discourse that treated *Bequemlichkeit* as a key measure of domestic design and cultural refinement. Contemporary treatises such as Johann Christoph Schmidt’s *Der Bürgerliche Baumeister* (1790) and Georg Suckow’s *Erste Gründe der Bürgerlichen Baukunst* (1781) reveal how comfort had become both an architectural and a moral category, linking spatial order to social progress. Schmidt presents the modernization of domestic architecture as an index of civilization, arguing that as ‘culture increases, and customs and ways of thinking change, dwellings require more elegance and convenience than in former times’ (Schmidt, 1790, p. 5). Both authors equate comfort with the efficiency of domestic labor and the moral order of the bourgeois household (Schmidt, 1790, pp. 10-11; Suckow, 1781, p. 4). While Schmidt and Suckow articulated comfort as a design principle, Berlepsch grounds it in her lived experience, measuring architecture through movement, routine, and effort. She describes how women are required to spend the day on the lowest level of the house, in a common parlor where personal belongings cannot remain and where social traffic is constant. From there, they must descend further to perform domestic labor in the kitchen and cellar.

⁸‘(...) so muss ich sagen, das mir ihre [Britische] Wohnungen, ihr Gesellschaftston, ihr ganzer Lebens-Apparat, nicht comfortable dünkt.’ (Berlepsch, 1803, p. 169).

With such an arrangement, Berlepsch continues, ‘we would feel that we were badly equipped for our health and comfort.’⁹

This experience of physical effort and vertical movement is inseparable from the social choreography of domestic space. As Berlepsch observes:

It is well known that no woman, of whatever rank or age, can accept any visit in her own sitting room, but it must be in the common parlor, which is always downstairs in the house. Thus, the drawing-room, where the ladies go after dinner, must be quite distant, if possible, on a different floor, from the dining room, where the men are left to the often somewhat tumultuous enjoyment of the bottle.¹⁰

Here, domestic comfort emerges not as a matter of furnishings or decoration but as a gendered condition produced through the organization of space. Women’s bodies are required to move repeatedly between floors, rooms, and degrees of visibility, while men remain spatially anchored. Architecture thus structures both physical labor and sociability, distributing effort, exposure, and rest unevenly along gendered lines. However, her position is not only gendered but also classed, since she does not take the servants into account when considering what a comfortable floor plan means.

Berlepsch describes the domestic only through the activities of certain women, the inhabitants. As Karin Wurst notes, ‘domesticity is experienced through activity but also through an ephemeral atmosphere or ambience’ (Wurst, 2023, p. 145). Dell Upton argues that bodily memory is formed through ‘repeated action in organized time and space’ (Upton, 2002, p. 720). Having lived in this house for some time, Berlepsch became familiar with its layout by repeatedly walking through it; this repeated action informed her and enabled her to develop a broader idea of a comfortable floor plan. For Berlepsch, it is not the material, the objects, or the design that determines a comfortable home; it is, first and foremost, the physical distance the body has to cover to perform daily life in the house (Wurst, 2023, p. 148).

For Berlepsch, comfort here refers to convenience and the organization of the rooms. A convenient house meant a rational and functional spatial organization that could meet the owner’s needs for both representation and everyday living (Stobart, 2022, p. 23). Berlepsch identifies the tension between aesthetics and practicalities, external appearance and internal organization. While these observations emerge from the effort and repetition of the gentry women’s movements through the house, they also anticipate Berlepsch’s broader concern with how domestic space organizes visibility, sociability, and gendered roles.

Berlepsch’s observations also address how domestic space organizes degrees of privacy and publicity within the house. She notes the differentiated use of rooms, such as the drawing room, where women would withdraw after dinner to brew coffee or tea, while men remained in the dining room. Only later would the men join the women in the drawing room. Such practices exemplify the socially codified use of space, in which the structure of rooms not only shapes movement but also the timing and visibility of gendered sociability.

Architectural historians have often emphasized the representational and political functions of the country house. As Mark Girouard argued, the country house operated as a ‘powerhouse’: not merely a residence for affluent families, but a seat of the ruling class, rooted in land ownership and designed to display authority, refinement, and success through architecture, furniture, and textiles (Girouard, 1978, p. 2). Within this framework, interiors served both representational spaces and as spaces of dwelling. Berlepsch’s account sits uneasily within this representational logic. Her repeated expressions of irritation during social encounters and domestic routines can be read as a refusal to conform to the expected decorum of admiration and display. Her concern with comfort was not focused on the quality of the armchairs, heating, or lighting, but rather on the spatial organization of the rooms. The domestic thus emerges not merely as a spatial arrangement or a symbol of power, but as a lived, gendered, and classed environment, one in which comfort operates as both a material and a moral category, unevenly distributed through everyday practice.

CONCLUSION

Emilie von Berlepsch reflects on the general layout of middle-class houses at St. Martin’s Abbey, a shift enabled by her longer stay, which allowed her to familiarize herself with the place and establish routines. Her recommendation letters opened doors for her, drawing her into these sites of consumption and display. Yet she

⁹ ‘(...) so würden wir uns für unsere Gesundheit und Bequemlichkeit schlecht eingerichtet glauben.’ (Berlepsch, 1803, p. 170).

¹⁰ ‘Es ist bekannt, das kein Frauenzimmer, wes Standes und Alters es sey, irgend einen Besuch in ihrem eigenen Wohnzimmer annehmen kann. sondern es muß im allgemeinen Sprachzimmer, (Parloir) das allezeit unten im Hause ist, geschehen. So muß auch das Theezimmer, (Drawing Room) wohin sich die Damen nach dem Essen begeben, ganz entfernt, wo möglich in einem andern Stockwerke seyn, als das Esszimmer, wo die Männer, dem oft etwas tumultuarischen Genuß der Flasche überlassen bleiben.’ (Berlepsch, 1803, pp. 171–172).

refused to follow the expected decorum of praising and acknowledging the decorations and exquisite furnishings. Her resistance, however, stemmed from a position of privilege, as access itself was never in question; at least she made it seem that way.

Comfort emerges as one of her key parameters for judging the quality of living. For her, a comfortable house is not defined by its lavish furniture or exquisite design. Instead, comfort is determined by the physical distance a body must cover to carry out daily life within space. This focus on the spatial organization of the home reveals an embodied understanding of comfort, one that positions the movement of the body and convenience at its core. However, Berlepsch's analysis is selective, as she fails to consider the bodies of the servants who inhabit and perform labor within these spaces. This omission underscores her positionality and the privilege embedded in her perspective: her comfort relies on a clear separation between those who own and those who serve, a hierarchical spatial and social division. It obscures the fact that the labor of the servants sustains the comfort of the gentry. In articulating her definition of comfort, Berlepsch engages in comparison and othering, evaluating the 'other' through criteria such as comfort, hygiene, and food. She defines comfort not only in terms of physical ease but also through cultural assumptions that dismiss or overlook the lived realities of other classes. The absence of a reflection on the German way of living may be because Berlepsch assumes her audience, Germans, would already share these norms or standards.

Discomfort became central to my own affective engagement with Berlepsch's account, particularly as I navigated the archives and grappled with how to immerse myself in the landscapes she encountered. I was confronted with the discrepancies between theoretical research and my embodied experience of moving through these spaces. This led me to weave together different temporalities, personal narrative, historical inquiry, and the complexities of architectural historiographical writing to address frictions and tensions between body and the built environment, discomfort, and failure. What began as a re-enactment of her experiences transformed into a broader reflection on navigating spaces through tension. The *affective anecdote*, as developed in this paper, provides a way to admit those situated frictions: moments of uncertainty, awkwardness, or failure as methodological evidence. It translates affect into critique without depoliticizing it. Attending to the affective and embodied dimensions of research allows us to perceive architecture as a system of orientations: who it welcomes, who it disciplines, and who it dismisses. These encounters demonstrate that writing architectural history is not a detached act of observation, but a situated, bodily process shaped by context, capacity, and positionality.

Ultimately, this study sketches an approach to feminist architectural historiography that is attentive to discomfort as an epistemic condition. To write from discomfort is not to seek resolution or empathy, but to acknowledge the uneven distribution of access, visibility, and ease. Structural conditions shape how we navigate space and how we are affected. Writing from discomfort treats the bodily encounter as a site where politics materialize in space. In placing Berlepsch's eighteenth-century reflections beside my own twenty-first-century experiences, the paper does not conflate them. Still, it lets their frictions speak between comfort and its critique, privilege and exclusion, architecture and its discontent.

Acknowledgement

I am thankful to the guest editors of this issue, Marias D'Avolio and Andri Gerber, for including my contribution and for their guidance and patience. I sincerely appreciate the reviewers' careful feedback, which significantly improved the quality of this manuscript. This article forms part of my doctoral dissertation, and I am indebted to my supervisor, Anne Hultsch, for her trust and support in exploring this experimental reflexive approach. I am also very grateful to my friends and colleagues, Niloofar Rasooli and Janus Lafontaine Carboni, for generously taking the time to read the manuscript thoroughly, engaging with it critically, and providing thoughtful feedback. I am particularly grateful to Niloofar Rasooli, whose encouragement to stay with the anecdote, write it down, and learn from it was decisive in the development of the affective anecdotes.

Funding

This article is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant agreement No. 949525).

Ethical statement

The research is based on historical literary sources and the author's own situated, reflective practice. Therefore, formal ethical approval or IRB clearance was not required.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Author contributions

The author is solely responsible for the conceptualization, research, analysis, and writing, as well as the preparation of the manuscript.

Data availability

The sources analyzed in this study consist of publicly available primary literary texts and secondary sources cited in the reference list. No new datasets were generated for this study.

AI disclosure

Grammarly was used to improve clarity, grammar, and spelling. The author retains full responsibility for the final manuscript.

Biographical sketch

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Research paper

Seeing and Being Seen: Intersectional Ecofeminism, Methodological Insights, and Women's Embodied Experiences with Nature in the UAE

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

Citation: Mhmood, F. (2026). Seeing and being seen: Intersectional ecofeminism, methodological insights, and women's embodied experiences with nature in the UAE. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(2), Article 26. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/19074>

Published: August 27, 2026

ABSTRACT

This article is a reflexive piece that draws on the methodological application of intersectionality in understanding women's material relationship with nature in the highly urbanised context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Drawing on situated knowledge and the deconstruction of binaries, such as nature/culture and green/desert, the article emphasises the importance of attending to embodied ways of knowing. Feminist research practices are adopted to explore what it means to be both subjected to the gaze and a constructor of the gaze, investigating the various perspectives that emerge when women guide the gaze. The article draws on a subset of four qualitative semi-structured interviews selected from a broader sample of 18 interviews conducted with young adult and middle-aged Emirati women. This article aims to discuss the value of integrating feminist thinking into studies of women and landscape, while also highlighting how situated and grounded experiences can contribute to and expand on existing theoretical feminist concepts. This piece contributes to contextualising methodological approaches to the application of intersectionality and ecofeminist theory into a non-Western, highly urbanised setting, and advocates towards a more nuanced and situated ecofeminism.

Keywords: ecofeminism, intersectionality, nature, postcolonial Middle East feminist studies, UAE

Textual representations of the Arab Gulf's landscape date back to travelogues published in the first quarter of the twentieth century by travellers and explorers such as Thomas and Thesiger, who are known to be the first to cross Arabia's deserts. The English diplomat and explorer Thomas (1932, p. 1) sought to 'unveil the unknown southern Arabian desert', anticipating that his expedition would evoke the 'imagination of Oriental fertility.' In his book *Arabia Felix*, Thomas (1932) writes:

Strange that the epithet 'Happy' should grace a part of the earth's surface, most of it barren wilderness (...) but there lies in the central south, bordering the Indian Ocean, a land at once of rare physical loveliness and of ancient fame (...) To have laboured in Arabia is to have tasted inevitably of her seduction (...) Yet Arabia has remained the forbidden land. Throughout the centuries scarce twenty European explorers have been able usefully to penetrate to her inhospitable heart (p. xxiii-xxiv).

The characterisation of the landscape as both 'happy' and 'forbidden', along with terms like 'loveliness', projects a gendered portrayal of the landscape, evoking the desert as a mysterious, alluring female figure; beautiful yet inaccessible, enticing and unattainable. Penetrating the 'inhospitable heart' underscores the metaphor of conquest and the masculine drive for supremacy and dominance over a feminised land. Rose (1993, p. 87) writes in the chapter *Looking at Landscape: The Uneasy Pleasures of Power* that works on problematising the

gaze towards landscape within cultural geography have argued that ‘the gaze of the fieldworker is part of the problematic, not a tool of analysis’, because it implies a specific way of seeing. Highly ‘romanticized and stylized representation’ of the life in the Trucial States (now United Arab Emirates), as the anthropologist Bristol-Rhys (2010, p. 33) notes, especially photographs by Donald Codrai taken between the 1940s and early 1960s and Thesiger were influential in constructing simplistic images, showing ‘natives’ as nomadic Bedouins, as a way of representing and telling a story of the ‘authentic’ life of the past, where men shown with falcons on their wrists, coffee pots on campfires, and women leading camels. These depictions, while they represent one aspect of the pre-oil period, have largely overlooked the complex social realities of those who inhabited different landscapes, such as coastal towns and agricultural regions that existed alongside desert settlements. Since the early 1970s, with the discovery of oil, the West became interested in the position and role of women in the Arab Gulf as the advent of the oil era catalysed significant growth in trade and opened the region to Western influence, bringing drastic changes in lifestyles and traditional values (Al-Sayegh, 2001). As Al-Sayegh (2001, p. 18) writes, researchers from various fields frequented the area, ‘hoping to write about the societal changes that were taking place’ and ‘women’s issues were the most appealing’ because to the Western eye, traditional values related to gender segregation and veiling were considered signs of backwardness, and the prevailing perception of women’s role before the oil was relegated to the domestic private sphere (AlMutawa, 2016) making these themes a focal point for debates around modernity and development. Together, narratives about the unknowable land and women being relegated to private spheres contributed to sweeping generalisations.

All of this points to the fact that there are other stories to be told, stories that complicate dominant narratives and open space for alternative ways of seeing and knowing. This article is a reflexive piece that draws on the methodological application of intersectionality in understanding women’s material relationship with nature in the highly urbanised context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It draws on critical inquiry into feminist theory, particularly questioning ecofeminism, and engaging with the recent work on reformulating it through an intersectional lens (Gaard, 2011; Kings, 2017). Although ecofeminist ideas have intersected with various fields, their application across different spatial scales, geographic, and climatic conditions on a global scale has been limited.

Within this research, I draw from several strands of feminist thought to frame my approach. First, I draw from feminist critiques of the gendered ways of looking at landscape, which have long questioned who has the power to look, who is looked at, and under what conditions (Mulvey, 1989; Rose, 1993; Shohat, 1991). Building on this, I turn to intersectionality, which was developed by feminists as an analytical tool ‘hoping to address and resolve the most fundamental and contentious of concerns within feminist scholarship—i.e. the existence of differences between women’ (Kings, 2017, p. 64). In particular, I situate my research within postcolonial Middle Eastern feminist studies, —a body of literature that emerged as corrective projects as many Middle Eastern feminist scholars recognised that ‘stereotypes of the Middle Eastern woman have been crucial to negative depictions of the region and its culture(s)’, they sought to reveal the complex realities of gender and woman in the Middle East and to explore how Middle Eastern women represent themselves (Abu-Lughod, 2001, pp. 103-104). However, my research takes a spatial approach wherein intersectionality not only highlights the differences between women but also how these differences can disrupt simplified perceptions of the land and binary spatial categories such as public/private, visible/invisible. I apply feminist spatial thinking to explore how differences among women lead to different spatial experiences that, in turn, offer more complex and nuanced readings of landscape. From this perspective, the landscape is not a neutral or singular backdrop, but a multilayered space shaped by intersecting histories, social positions, and ways of inhabiting.

This article is based on a subset of four qualitative semi-structured interviews selected from a broader sample of 18 interviews, conducted with young adult and middle-aged Emirati women. This article does not aim to extensively report the full empirical findings of the research but rather discusses the value of integrating feminist thinking into studies on women and landscape, while also discussing how situated and grounded experiences can contribute to and expand existing theoretical concepts. This piece contributes to contextualising methodological approaches to the application of intersectionality and ecofeminist theory into a non-Western, highly urbanised setting, and advocates towards a more nuanced and situated ecofeminism.

GENDER STUDIES AND MIDDLE EAST FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP

In their article on gender and geography, Garcia Ramon and Monk (2007, p. 1) note that advancing the scholarship on gender within the discipline of geography, which dates back to the 1970s, ‘is primarily the work of women’, whose presence in specific geographical contexts has influenced both the focus and context of research on gender-related themes. There is in fact a rich feminist scholarship within the postcolonial Middle East, most of it is focused on North Africa and the Levant region. In her seminal essay “*Orientalism*” and *Middle East Feminist Studies*, the Palestinian American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (2001) writes that Edward Said’s *Orientalism*

was not intended to be a component of feminist scholarship or theory; however, it has engendered feminist scholarship in Middle East studies and beyond. As Kanna et al. (2020, p. 2, citing Abu-Lughod, 1998) write:

Postcolonial Middle East feminist studies have been reflexive about how to counter stereotypes on women's oppression by showing how imperialism, nationalism, capitalism, and class have contributed to shaping projects of "modernity," "tradition," or "authenticity" that impact gender norms and relations.

Some of these early works include *Europe's Myths of the Orient* by Kabbani's (1986) critiquing the construction of erotic stereotypes in literature and painting, as well as Zahra Arat's (1998) *Deconstructing Images of "The Turkish Women"* (cited in Abu-Lughod 2001), and a collection of essays in the edited book *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Abu-Lughod, 1998) as well as feminist scholarship on gender and place including Mahmood's (2004) *Politics of Piety*.

However, work on gender and place, particularly in the Arab Gulf, is still limited and has mainly emerged during the last two decades. Some of these works include a collection of essays in Sonbol's (2012) *Gulf Women* presenting discourses on the life of women in the Arab Gulf from the pre-modern to modern periods, Le Renard's (2014) *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia*, and *Beyond Exception: New Interpretation of the Arabian Peninsula* drawing on postcolonial theory, feminism and racialization to challenge dominant portrayals of the Arabian Peninsula as politically exceptional or culturally uniform (Kanna et al., 2020). In the context of the UAE, very few works have discussed state feminism and the perception of women in leadership positions (AlMutawa, 2020; Sinha et al., 2023). Other works on gender and place in the UAE include Bristol-Rhys's (2010) *Emirati Women: Generations of Change*, Reichenbach's (2015) *Gazes that Matter: Young Emirati Women's Spatial Practices in Dubai*, and Rana AlMutawa's (2022) *Navigating the Cosmopolitan City: Emirati Women and Ambivalent Forms of Belonging in Dubai*. These studies on gender and place have mostly focused on modern urban commercial spaces like malls and cafés, which have been central to discussions of leisure and social spaces in contemporary urban life in the UAE.

An article by Al Oraiimi (2011), a professor in gender studies at UAE University, points to some of the reasons behind the limitations of feminist scholarship in this context. Al Oraiimi (2011) writes that only in 2002 did the term 'gender' enter UAE's social agenda as a response to the United Nations report on the low level of women's participation in decision-making, which is historically rooted in the UAE's patriarchal society. Al Oraiimi further states:

The term entered quickly and pervasively into our traditional culture, the Arabic language and our religious frame of reference, but we have still not developed a fixed mechanism for dealing with it (...) But we, as Arabs and Muslims, live in a different situation and have our own approach to dealing with women's issues (2011, p. 82).

Based on interviews with a group of distinguished women in the UAE, as describe, though their professional background is not clearly stated in the article, Al Oraiimi (2011, p. 84) found that there is a lack of acceptance to terms or concepts such as 'feminism' and 'gender' as they are both western concepts, 'they incite women against men,' and they are an unnecessary call for equality since the UAE's constitution is seen to provide equal opportunities in terms of health, education, and pivotal professional roles for women. This suggests that progress is seen as complete, where bottom-up critiques and activism that feminists have garbled with are seen as unnecessary. It also points to the reason behind the apprehension of engaging with feminist theories. Today, the UAE authorities underscore women's pivotal roles in the workforce within various sectors, as a state-led success story and a key achievement of this young country (Heard-Bey, 2021), promoted through the appointment of women in leadership positions. AlMutawa (2020) argues that the recognition women in leadership positions receive often depends on their adherence to established religious and cultural norms set for them. The caveat here, however, as AlMutawa (2020) argues, is that while gender-framing can legitimise women's public roles by aligning them with prevailing cultural values, it may simultaneously reinforce existing hierarchies by relying on them, leading to sexist assumptions, such as the notion that caregiving is a woman's primary role, and limits the emergence of alternative perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, I engage with intersectionality and feminist theories in two ways: first, as a trained architect writing from a feminist perspective, and second, as an Emirati woman. My professional background in architecture and educational background in urban design and landscape have informed not only how I engage with spatial forms, but also how I understand the relationship between space, power, and identity. As an Emirati woman, my perspective is shaped by direct experiences of the UAE's social and cultural context, as well as the contradictions, negotiations, and nuances within it. Therefore, this section is not only about how I gathered the narratives, but also how I positioned myself in relation to the narratives that the participants shared; how I listened, remembered, and wrote.

The theoretical foundation of this research is rooted in feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and intersectionality. My approach draws from and builds on early feminist scholarship on the gaze (Kabbani, 1986;

Mulvey, 1989; Rose, 1993; Shohat, 1991), particularly examining ‘what it means to be both the subject of the gaze and a constructor of the gaze’ and what different perspectives emerge when women ‘guide the gaze’ (Dando, 2007, p. 17). This dual positioning, of seeing and also being seen, resonates deeply with my approach as both a female researcher engaging with narratives of other women and someone who shares some aspects of the participants’ identities. Being seen in this sense is grounded in lived experiences tied to embodied ways of knowing—understanding a presence that is felt, sensed and lived through the body, rather than a detached observation. During the research, I have acknowledged that the women I spoke with are not merely subjects of inquiry but co-creators of knowledge. While writing, I was attentive to how their narratives enter the space of academic authority, not as subjects of analysis but as voices that may contribute to informing or refining theoretical frameworks such as ecofeminism. In this sense, I reminded myself what kinds of knowledge become possible when we ‘see’ and ‘listen’ differently.

Intersectionality has served as a key methodological lens. Within this, generational difference was acknowledged as one of the factors that shape women’s experiences and perceptions in distinct ways. When discussing narratives of middle-aged women, I’m referring to the oil-boom generation that delineates those who grew up living through the oil-boom in the region from 1973 to 1983; a period marked by rapid urban and social transformation, witnessing the shift from a traditional society to a globalised one. Young adults’ narratives refer to the second generation, which is the post-oil generation that delineates those who were born after the federation of the UAE in 1971, where economic transformation had already established a modern lifestyle driven by Western models of progress. Linking generational difference to the urban and social transformations provides a historical lens that explains differences and the change in traditional values and perceptions. Additionally, as I began conducting interviews with the participants, my initial questions focused broadly on understanding the participants’ use of outdoor recreational and leisure spaces starting from their childhood, particularly spaces that provided them with a sense of being within nature. This was a deliberate methodological choice, rooted in my interest in understanding how the participants experience and engage with the land itself and how they experience different landscapes in relation to leisure and socialisation, rather than urban commercial spaces like malls and cafés, which are often the focus of discussions on leisure and social spaces in contemporary urban life within the literature on the UAE.¹

Additionally, the word landscape in Arabic is *manthar ṭabīʿī* or *mashhad ṭabīʿī*, which translates to natural scenery or a view of natural scenery, where *manthar* or *mashhad* means scene and *ṭabīʿī* means natural, rather than a reference to a physical lived space.² In this sense, the meaning of the word landscape in Arabic evokes aesthetic representations of nature rather than material and embodied experience of land. This understanding includes a combination of both a landscape found, not built, and visual constructs.³ This was the approach taken in applying the core components of intersectionality into empirical and spatial research. As Kings (2017, p. 66) argues, ‘intersectionality promises to avoid the common traps of “essential difference” by looking beyond the categories which dominated essentialism debates in the 1980s and 1990s.’ Following this, I theoretically engaged with intersectional ecofeminism, wherein categories such as nature are not fixed. This approach is also in line with Agarwal’s (1992, p. 123) critique of ecofeminism, arguing that the relationship with nature needs to be understood as being rooted in material realities and specific forms of interaction and that concepts of nature, culture, gender, and so on, are historically and socially constructed and vary across and within cultures and time periods.’ Additionally, my methodology draws on feminist epistemology, particularly Haraway’s (1988) situated knowledge; knowledge that is partial, embodied, and accountable to specific positions. Haraway (1988, p. 589) argues for ‘epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard.’

My positionality as an Emirati woman with roots in the context I’m studying positions me primarily as an insider. With that awareness in mind, I avoid claims to project a ‘native’ and ‘authentic’ insider’s point of view. Consequently, I aimed to frame my methods in terms of reflexivity rather than objectivity. My intent throughout the interview process was to understand the plurality of experiences and represent women’s voices of their own spatial experiences and perceptions of landscape. As opposed to emphasising a dichotomy between the insider and the outsider or the observer and the observed, I have adopted Kirin Narayan’s approach (1993, p. 671) that is centred on moving ‘against the fixity of a distinction’ between ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ and focusing instead on the researcher’s shifting and situational identities. Therefore, I approach the narratives of participants as situated, varied, and shaped by intersecting factors such as generational difference, marital status, motherhood, and geographical background within the UAE. Additionally, I approach this research with an awareness that my own position defies simple categorisation of native/non-native and insider/outsider. Sharing linguistic, cultural, and geographic commonalities with the participants I interviewed positions me as an ‘insider’ or ‘native’ researcher. However, following Narayan’s (1993) approach, I recognise that identities are made up of multiple strands, some pulled forward in certain contexts, others tucked away, depending on the situation. At times, some aspects of my identity, such as my urban upbringing, position me as an outsider, particularly during conversations with Bedouin

women where differences in lived experiences are more pronounced. Additionally, Emiratis are generally recognised by the national attire, *abaya* and *shayla* for women and *kandura* for men, which is widely seen as a representation of authenticity and national identity. Yet in the contemporary context, wearing it is more of a social expectation or a matter of personal preference rather than a religious obligation. Such a visual marker, which I do not necessarily share, operates as a marker of identity; therefore, to the outsider's eye, my position may appear ambiguous or even distant from the context I'm part of. Therefore, I approach intersectionality as a way to think beyond binaries and to attend to both complexity and difference. It allows for accounting for the multiple, sometimes contradictory, layers that shape one's experiences. Additionally, I acknowledge that this research focuses on a relatively privileged minority, Emirati women as female citizens of the UAE, who constitute around six per cent (Heard-Bey, 2021) of the total population of around 10 million (Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, n.d.). Emiratis benefit from privileges that come with citizenship, including free education and healthcare, subsidised housing, and government employment. Employment opportunities for Emiratis are shaped by the policy of Emiratisation, which is a state-led initiative that prioritises the recruitment and retention of citizens, mainly in the private sector. According to the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation regulations (2024), companies that fail to comply with the Emiratisation regulations and to achieve the specific quota face financial penalties. Additionally, employment opportunities are complemented by state housing policies, through which the government allocates specific neighbourhoods to Emirati citizens, either by land grants or subsidised housing programs. This social position, as one of privilege coupled with minority status, shapes everyday experiences of space in nuanced ways. The aim is not to universalise the narratives, but to foreground difference; how privilege, power dynamics that shape space, and identity intersect in situated ways.

SENSORY EXPERIENCES AND EMBODIED WAYS OF KNOWING

In common parlance, people do not only use the word desert (*Sabha* in Arabic) to describe the landscape. *Sabha* is a generic term that carries a geographical connotation, often associated with aridity. Within the Arab Gulf, *ba'ar* denotes open land or wilderness beyond cultivated areas and settlements. It is a more colloquial term that refers to the desert through a social lens. It is the desert as lived and experienced, framed as more than just a terrain; it is a sensory, embodied experience of landscape. This understanding reflects how people relate to and experience the land. Responses by two young adults, both from Bedouin backgrounds, one raised in Hatta and the other in Al Dhaid, which are both agricultural areas in the UAE, highlight the nuanced and place-based ways in which the landscape is described with subtle variations and textures. *Ramla* refers to sandy areas, emphasising their texture, while *argoob* refers specifically to sand dunes or undulated terrain, which is more about describing the form. *Badiyah* is an open space within the desert often associated with Bedouin settlements. *Seyh* (*seyouh* plural) is a flat expansive plain with gravel and clay fertile soil, typically the areas on the periphery of farms:

Seyh is different than ba'ar. Seyh is often found on the periphery of farms. It's characterised by light gravel and is rich in trees (...) especially Samr (acacia tree) and Sidr (juzube tree) (...) Al-ba'ar is mostly sand with wide pores lacking the minerals needed for plants. So, the most common tree in the desert is the Ghaf, which can live for a long time, and sometimes you might find Sidr or Samr trees. Seyouh, although they are gravelly, have soil that is rich, similar to the soil in farms (P_16).

Just as people do not speak of the desert in general terms, they refer to specific places as well as practices when describing experiences of being within nature, such as the Hajar mountains of Hatta, the date palm farms in Al Dhaid, or private home gardens. This mirrors that the concept of nature is not a universal category; it is a particular situated understanding shaped by place-based experiences. One of the participants described the rural setting of Hatta, where she grew up, an inland exclave of the emirate of Dubai located in the Hajar mountains in the eastern part of the UAE:

I spent my childhood in Hatta (...) the whole area was farms, wadis, and seyooḥ [open plains] (...) I grew up in the countryside (...) I remember how we used to go out walking, collect pebbles, sit under the date palms, pick fruits from the trees around us. It was a childhood immersed in nature, surrounded by nature (P_16).

While both the desert and nature are often framed through a visual register, they are experienced in deeply embodied ways. The relationship to the land exceeds the visual; it is shaped through sound, touch, movement and memory, all of which are modes of sensing that root people to the land.

When I asked the participant, who grew up in Al Dhaid, an agricultural area within the emirate of Sharjah, to describe her experiences within nature, she recounted her experience in family-owned farms and privately owned lands, mediated by social connections with other tribes. I began to gain a deeper understanding of her experience, one that my own background did not expose me to, as she recounted:

Do you know what's al-raqq? You may not fully understand what I'm saying because I come from a Bedouin background. [I responded that I didn't know what it was]. It's underground water (...). There's a trail that very few people know about, very, very few. Maybe only the people from that area know it. There's water there, water that flows, summer or winter, it's always running. I used to put my backpack on and I'm not the type to wear a t-shirt and trousers. I'd go in my kandura [traditional

ankle-length dress], just like that, with sneakers (...) As you walk, you come across *tunwi* [water well]. Do you know what a *tunwi* is? And if it had rained, you could even shower a bit in that water, it's nice [laughed], with your clothes on, just like that. You'd dry off by the time you reached the car. The *tunwis* are hand-dug, not excavated with machinery. The people from that area dug them themselves (...) I don't drink bottled water anymore. I just can't. We drink water that we go and fetch ourselves. People who hear me say that ask, 'What era are you living in?' And I just tell them, 'That's how I am, I love it.' (...) my husband's friend told us, 'come, we have a *tunwi* with sweet water.' So we kept drawing from it, and we still do to this day (...) [I asked if it's for everyone] it's not for everyone. You know the term *al-hiyur*? They have lands that are reserved for them and their families. They get upset, and fights can even break out if someone trespasses or comes without permission. We know someone from that area, so whenever we run out of water, we go. They own the land, and the *tunwi* was dug by their great-great-grandfather, you know (P_17).

The participant's narrative articulates a form of customary tribal laws and traditional knowledge that governs water wells within privately owned land. The wells anchor a network of ancestral routes and communal territories. As the participant described, her access is contingent on tribal ties.

A middle-aged participant (P_12) recalled growing up in Umm Hurair neighbourhood, one of Dubai's older urban districts along the Creek. She described her surroundings by recalling that, before urban public parks started to open, she played on the beach and in the neighbourhood. She recounted her experience being within nature with a sense of nostalgia in a way that contrasted with young adults' narratives, whose accounts were less concerned with reviving the past or re-experiencing old traditions. However, foraging for the sorrel plant was described as a collective activity; a wild edible plant (often tastes sour) locally known as *humayd* that grows in the desert after rain:

We've always gone to al-ba'ar. It's part of our traditions and customs (...) even if we have farms, during the holidays, everyone camps in al-ba'ar. We go back to the traditions of the past. We camp and cook using firewood, not on gas stoves, to revive the heritage (...) It's something we continue to love (...) we walk around, in the winter days when it rains, humayd grows. We don't sit still; we walk around looking for humayd (P_12).

The participants' narratives show how generational differences, place of upbringing, and Bedouin or urban backgrounds lead to differentiated perceptions and experiences. Generational differences position participants within different historical moments of urban change, while the place of upbringing influences what is perceived as ordinary versus national collective heritage. Both young adults, (P_16) and (P_17), of Bedouin backgrounds raised in agricultural areas (Hatta & Al Dhaid), describe proximity to farms, strolling through date palm plantations, and practising gardening as part of daily life, rather than a revival of past practices. Their descriptions of different parts of the desert associated with agriculture alongside those considered non-agricultural highlight that the landscape is not perceived as uniform but as overlapping terrains, each carrying specific social and material practices. This perspective unsettles the overarching binary opposition between desert and green, where cultivation is positioned as the opposite of the desert rather than a variant terrain *within* the desert. The middle-aged participant from Dubai (P_12), who grew up in an urban neighbourhood, frames the recreational activity of going to *al-ba'ar* as a day outing, in a landscape perceived as a public common, which contrasts with participant (P_17), whose access extends to privately owned lands where others without similar social ties may be seen as outsiders. The participant from an urban area frames going to *al-ba'ar* through the discourse of cultural revival, in the midst of a rapidly modernising context. In this way, desert outings are seen as a means of reclaiming traditions threatened by urban expansion and modernisation.

IN ONE'S OWN GARDEN

Gardening emerged as a key theme during the interviews with some participants. Gardening offered an embodied relationship with the land. Responses by two participants illustrated that gardening was not only about cultivating plants, but also cultivating a sense of autonomy, care and connection to the land. The participant (P_16) from Al Dhaid explained that gardening is an important practice for her and that gaining full agency over the garden only became possible after she got married and moved into her own house, whereas in a shared household, gardening felt like a conditional activity:

I started gardening after I got married, when I had my own independent house (...) [I asked: and before that, you didn't practice gardening?] Oh, I did practice gardening before that, it is not that I didn't. But you know it is different in your own house, no one will object and pull the tree that you planted. You see, we used to practice gardening at my mother's house, but she was a bit ... one day we'd plant something, and the next day she'd change her mind, ask us to remove it, and replant it somewhere else. That used to make me feel sorry for it—seeing it die. There's something special about the plants you grow yourself. Honestly, I sometimes feel like when I'm sick, or when I have a child to take care of and I neglect my plants, they get sad. I tell myself, ya Allah (oh god), it's different when you personally water them. There's a relationship between you and the plants. Man ittakala 'ala ghayrihi qalla khayruhu [an Arabic proverb expressing self-reliance and dependence; whoever relies on others has less of their own good] (P_17).

The cabbage story shared by another participant, who is middle-aged, single, and living with her mother, speaks volumes about agency. (P_18) grew up in the urban neighbourhood of Al Rashidiya in Dubai, which used to be a national housing district. The participant's story highlights the tensions between individual gardening desires and collective household decisions, showing how the act of landscaping, even within a private garden, can be regulated, contested, or limited. This account extends the discussion of gardening as a form of agency and autonomy, while also emphasising that gardens are not merely sites of visual aesthetics, but spaces where values and priorities are negotiated:

It is extremely important! [Having a garden] (...) My mom loves plants (...) But at the same time, I can't call it a garden because it is synthetic grass (...) mom wants the backyard to look beautiful throughout the year (...) I really love natural plants, and I feel it is important. If it was my house, I would have done that (...) let me tell you this story, it upsets me whenever I remember it. So I grew some vegetables; mint, rocca many many things, potato, tomato, chili, and there were some things which I didn't know what they were so I was waiting for them to grow (...) For example, the cabbage; cabbage was one of the things. So I waited for about five months for it to grow (...) I was waiting patiently for that one cabbage (...) and my mother called in the gardener and told him take it, take it, and I told my mom I waited for it for so long! She said: yeah you can buy it you know. I was like nooo, I will buy it for him [the gardener] but this one is for us (P_18).

The participants' narratives highlight how gardens operate as layered domestic landscapes whose authorship shifts across time and social thresholds. This first participant (P_17) described how she felt a sense of autonomy in relation to cultivating the garden after marriage, when competing household claims no longer constrained her interventions. Gardening, as described in the narrative by the second participant (P_18), was shaped by familial dynamics. Traditionally in the UAE, single women and men reside with their natal families until marriage. Upon marriage, women often move into the husband's household, while men either remain within or near the family's home or establish their own household. However, these norms are gradually shifting in response to broader processes of modernisation, as increasingly, work and education require relocating to other emirates, leading some to live independently prior to marriage.

For the first participant, gardening practices are embedded in a continuity of everyday engagements with cultivation, rooted in the rhythms of agricultural regions. In the second narrative, the preference for artificial grass in the garden reflects the value for neatness and a controlled version of nature; nature without unpredictability and beauty without decay. In this sense, the garden becomes a curated surface, valued not for its ecological authenticity but for its capacity to sustain a particular visual image of beauty under extreme climatic conditions. This preference for an idealised landscape echoes landscape development approaches at the city scale led by private developers aimed at creating manicured green spaces to attract investment and promote properties. In this framing, greenery itself becomes a commodity.

LINKING THE NARRATIVES TO INTERSECTIONAL ECOFEMINISM

Using ecofeminist intersectionality in a situated and context-specific way challenges 'the common traps of "essential difference"' (Kings, 2017, p. 66). This section shows how this approach opens up ways to move beyond fixed categories like 'nature', 'privacy', and binary readings of landscape as desert versus green.

Theoretically, the narratives tie to the continuation of ecofeminism within an intersectional framework (Kings, 2017). They respond to Agarwal's (1992) critique of ecofeminist earlier work, as in ecofeminism ignored women's material relationship with nature and positioned 'woman' as one unitary category that disregards the differences between women and that understandings of nature, culture and gender are 'historically and socially constructed and vary across and within cultures and time periods' (123). Indeed, as the participants' narratives illustrate, nature is not necessarily experienced in a literal sense; it can be sensorial, and the factors and range of circumstances that influence women's vastly different experiences are not limited to the sole category of gender, but to other intersecting factors such as land ownership, internal hierarchies, and socio-economic status. Since this research extends intersectionality into the realm of spatial analysis, the narratives inform ecofeminism in a spatial sense by expanding on the category 'nature', where 'nature' is generally not 'seen' but experienced through the senses within urban and non-urban spaces across public, semi-private and private spheres.

Privacy emerged as a prominent theme across various landscapes and among all participants, though the preference for it varied among the participants. It was individual and situational. The need for privacy in the context of the Arab world and Muslim women is often misunderstood through a reductive lens that equates it solely with seclusion, invisibility or patriarchal control. Such misperceptions stem from the 'veiling and unveiling' narratives, which are terms by which 'the East has long been apprehended (and devalued)', what Said (1978) referred to as 'the dogmas of Orientalism' (Abu-Lughod, 2001, p. 108). The participants' narratives challenge the notion of privacy as a fixed or universally defined category. Bolleter (2015, p. 633, citing Andraos, 2007, p. 53), writing from a landscape architecture perspective, notes that privatised spaces offer a greater degree of freedom for female Emiratis, 'whereas in the west, the privatisation of public space is considered to amount to a reduction in "civil liberties and freedom of expression."' Indeed, this sense of 'freedom' is not just about being shielded

from the public eye, but rather about having agency over the spaces women inhabit and the spatial boundaries they establish by and for themselves. The desire for private gardens or the preference for privately owned farms as spaces of recreation and leisure, for instance, is not always rooted in social or religious norms. Such choices, within certain conditions shaped by intersecting factors, may reflect privilege and acts of agency. Ownership of date palm plantations carries social power, even if not profitable; such ownership confers cultural prestige (Doherty, 2017). This sense of agency is shaped by privilege that is mediated by factors such as property ownership and socio-economic status. As Mahmood (2004, p. 15) states in the chapter *The subject of Freedom*, If the ability to enact 'change' is historically and culturally specific, then the sense of agency cannot be universal or a fixed concept, what may appear as acts of conformity 'from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency', which can only be understood through the specific concepts, norms, and structures that define a particular culture and place. When privacy becomes a monolithic symbol for veiling and unveiling, it overlooks its social and individual dimensions, perpetuating a blanket narrative that disregards complexity and context.

A common goal of ecofeminism is to deconstruct dualisms such as nature/culture, body/mind, human/animal in favour of a more interconnected non-hierarchical view of life. Relying on fixed categories reduces complexity. Thus, ecofeminism provides a productive framework to deconstruct 'the false binary', described elsewhere (Mhmood, 2021), between desert and green as well as conventional ways of understanding spatial categories within arid regions. In particular, the narratives have revealed that the appreciation for gardens is not merely symbolic or aesthetic as a contrast to the arid desert, but rather sites of embodied engagement with the land. Additionally, it has been noted (Mhmood & Sunikka-Blank, 2025) that the construction of artificial lakes and human-made oases within the desert landscape is closely linked to efforts to preserve the national identity in the face of rapid urbanisation, as participants regarded these 'edits' to the landscape as essential for maintaining the culture and fostering a sense of belonging for future generations. However, interpretations of the proliferation of gardens in the Arab Gulf or the broader Islamic world often emphasise their visual or religious resonance, as echoes of the Islamic paradise (Bolleter, 2015, 2009; Brookes, 1987; Ouis, 2002). As Bolleter (2009, p. 28) writes, 'the greening project takes on moral and religious overtones within the context of the UAE', as the image of paradise in Islamic culture stems in part from the idea that descriptions of the Garden of Paradise serve not only as a vision to strive for in the afterlife but also as a model to be recreated on earth (citing Brookes, 1987). However, an intersectional ecofeminist reading foregrounds the material and relational aspects of these landscapes. Rather than approaching the garden as a replication of a religious ideal, women may value gardens because they offer a tangible relationship to the land, one that is not alien to the desert but part of it. Additionally, considering my positionality as a trained architect who practised in the UAE, I engage with but move beyond the symbolic reading of gardens as representations of the 'Garden of Paradise', which is often emphasised in academic literature. While this framing is not without value, it does not fully capture the reasons why people themselves value gardens and greenery, nor does it reflect the motivations of private developers. During the time I worked in Dubai for a private developer, references to desired landscaping design were primarily focused on recreating an idealised landscape, one that mimics and evokes a particular experience, similar to that of green parks and gardens in Europe. In light of the current charged political situation and media coverage contributing to a skewed and essentialist public perception towards Islam and other religions, while my own position is neither one of alignment nor rejection but one that seeks to recognise complexity and difference, for private developers operating within a capitalist mindset focused on attracting investors and tourists, it is perhaps more profitable to divorce religion and it is more 'attractive' to associate landscape design with liberal contexts and universal ideals of aesthetics.

CONCLUSION

This piece has explored how the application of intersectionality and feminist research practices provides a more nuanced understanding of women's embodied relationships with nature in the highly urbanised context of the UAE. By reflecting on the methodological process, this article emphasises the importance of engaging with embodied ways of knowing and deconstructing binaries such as nature/culture and green/desert. The study contributes to the growing body of research on integrating intersectionality within ecofeminism. To address the critiques of essentialism and ethnocentrism often associated with earlier ecofeminism works, ecofeminist intersectionality needs to be utilised in a contextually specific and situated way. The article shows how this approach can open up ways of moving beyond fixed categories like 'nature', 'privacy', and binary readings of landscape; desert versus green.

Acknowledgement

This research was undertaken as part of my doctoral studies at the Faculty of Architecture and History of Art at the University of Cambridge. I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Minna Sunikka-Blank, for her

guidance throughout this research. I thank the research participants who generously shared their stories with me. Thanks to the editors and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback. All interpretations and conclusions presented in this article are those of the author.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Ethical statement

The four interviews used in this article are drawn from a broader sample of eighteen interviews conducted for this research. Ethical approval was received from Cambridge University's Research Ethics Committee (Faculty of Architecture and History of Art) on 13 November 2022. A Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form were provided to all interviewees prior to the interviews.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Author contributions

The author was responsible for all aspects of this research, including conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation.

Data availability

All data supporting the findings of this study are included in the manuscript.

AI disclosure

The author reports no use of AI in preparing this article.

Biographical sketch

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¹ For example, within the social sciences and ethnographic studies, scholars have documented how malls in Dubai can serve as spaces of belonging and social contestation (see Almutawa, 2020, “Glitzy” Malls and Coffee Shops), how Emirati themed leisure spaces and restaurants serve as places of belonging (see Reichenbach & Ibrahim, 2019, “Pulling at our heartstrings”: Emirati-Themed Leisure Venues as Places of Belonging), and how young Emirati women negotiate access to public spaces such as shopping malls and coffee shops (see Reichenbach, 2015, *Gazes that Matter: Young Emirati Women's Spatial Practices In Dubai*).

² See Elsheshtawy, 2024, *A Glossary 2.0* for translations of architecture and urban terms from Arabic to English.

³ For more on this, see Doherty, 2008, *The Landscape of Dubai's Urbanism* on the meaning of landscape in Arabic and the efficacy of the image of landscape in shaping patterns of urbanisation.

Research paper

Tentacular-Feminine-Body as City Archivist: An Interdisciplinary Methodology Across Dance and Urban Planning

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

Citation: Akinleye, A., & Karimnia, E. (2026). Tentacular-feminine-body as city archivist: An interdisciplinary methodology across dance and urban planning. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(2), Article 27. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/19075>

Published: August 27, 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the *tentacular-feminine-body* as an embodied methodology for exploring archives as relational constituted in the encounters between citizen and city. Rooted in Black/endarkened feminist thought and developed through an interdisciplinary research partnership in dance and urban studies, *tentacular-feminine-body* resists hegemonic framings of place-making that erase or distort marginalized perspectives. Rather than treating archive as a static repository, we conceive of it as a living process of sensation, memory, and encounter, in which the city is forever entangled with the bodies that move through it and the grammars that shape it. Drawing on dance choreographic practices as a tool of sensorial and situated inquiry, we position the *tentacular-feminine-body* as a threshold through which research questions arise. Our findings articulate three areas of inquiry: the grammar of the city, the feminine of the city, and the city archivist. By emphasizing dynamism, plurality, and interconnectedness, we suggest that the *tentacular-feminine-body* provides a methodology through which design can be informed by collaborative, relational archives of citizen–city life.

Keywords: archives, relational, dance, tentacular, urban encounters

I breathe in the cool March air of North West London as I step through the train tube doors onto a quiet platform. I have been away from the city for a few months. Since the veins of the insular tubes of the airplane and glass-lined hallways that took me from the plane to the terrazzo tiles of large arrival lobbies, and back to the tubes of the railways into London, this moment is the first when my body seems to fully drink in my presence, here, back in the city. The hairs on my arms quiver at a growing breeze, a particular tinge of damp cold that bathes the pores of my brown skin with recognition. I struggle with the weight of my bags as I ascend the stairs from the platform. Someone almost runs into me, transfixed on the train about to leave. The street tickles my nose follicles with the aroma of past memories: the traffic of thousands of roads crossed, the smell of chips eaten late at night, concrete-encased Buddleia flowering in the cracks of the city walls, and the early morning scent of commuters pushing past me to the train system with damp hair and hot coffee. As they push past me with my heavy case, ascending into London morning, my muscles remember myself here, I remember my place.

We identify as Black and brown female scholars in Dance and Urban Studies respectively, exploring the ramifications of material and relational encounters between citizen and city. We are interested in developing methods for examinations of encounter with the city that do not fix others as ‘already constituted subjects’ and

in doing so archive 'regimes of difference' (Ahmed, 2000, p. 8). We suggest such methods might also offer the potential to unsettle readings of the urban landscape and in doing so generate alternative, collaborative archives of encounter. In this paper, we reflect on the development of an emerging methodology drawn from our interdisciplinary, ethnographic research into urban structures that exist across the physical, social, and political. The goal of our work together is to look at how the city can be engaged and designed in ways that lay foundations, change, bridge, and recognise non-mainstream bodies such as our own. We are interested in the touchpoint of human-citizens meeting the city in a union of the felt, memoried, multiplicity of presences. We explore how these encounters shape city/citizen bodies into partnerships coerced and/or enriched by the urban planner.

Although we share conceptual experiences derived from autoethnographic reflections of being in Western cities, we come from different scholarly disciplines, these being Dance and Urban Studies. At this point, our collaboration has been primarily focused on developing a shared methodology. We are committed to developing a framework that authentically emerges from the interdisciplinary nature of our collaboration and the Afro/endarkened feminist ontology our lived experiences have pointed us toward. We began from the position that interdisciplinary research must first be grounded in a shared methodological framework. Accordingly, the findings we present here are not yet the outcomes of the main research, but the framework itself, developed through a reflective, interdisciplinary process that we view as an essential contribution in its own right. In keeping with Black and brown indigenous epistemologies (Deloria Jr. & Wildcat, 2001; Māhina et al., 2021; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008), where ways of knowing often precede ways of being, we understand methodology as the creation of context rather than a set of procedures. Building a shared methodological framework was therefore not preparation for inquiry but inquiry itself, an act that both revealed the limits of familiar questions and brought new questions into being.

We drew on existing literature to contextualize our approach. Our generative work of building a methodological framework is informed by notions of dialogue, joy, and challenging body politics that critique mainstream architecture and urban design practices (Schalk et al., 2017). Alongside literature that acknowledges the impositions of looking and being looked at in urban space, such as bell hooks' discussion of oppositional gaze (hooks, 1992), and being re-oriented in space or misaligned with spatial expectations (Ahmed, 2006). We identify with Black/endarkened feminism accounts (Dillard, 2012), which reflect our own lived experiences as women of colour encountering urban spaces. These scholars help us contextualise our own lived experiences in the city, offering ways to understand and digest urban narratives while also exposing the biases embedded in dominant accounts of city making (Storper & Scott, 2016; Parnell & Robinson, 2012; Roy, 2009; Robinson, 2006). Resonances with the discussions in the literature through referencing our lived experiences, lead us to recognize our bodies activate the archival, as sites of embodied memory in the physicality of our lived experience. Gestures, habits, scars, rhythms are records of how we have moved through and been moved by the city. Therefore, using the somatic framing of dance (Cruz-Banks, 2023; Fraleigh & Riley, 2024), we see the ethnographic¹ turn we draw on as an archive of sensations, muscle memory, and embodied knowing that recall, resist, and reimagine urban narratives beyond dominant accounts. While urban planning often treats the city as a fixed archive of structures and histories (Rao, 2009), we shift the paradigm by mobilizing archives as encounters between living, embodied records, the mutual traces through which citizen and city continually constitute one another. Many of these traces, however, are routinely excluded from or erased within official, dominant narratives, leaving absences that our work seeks to notice and re-inscribe. These exclusions from the cannon archives often privilege dominant standpoints and erase the perspectives of Black and brown women, deemed in place by being out of place (Ahmed, 2000; McKittrick, 2006, p. xv), and leave us struggling with discourses that erase and despatialize their [our] sense of place. (McKittrick, 2006, p. xiii).

We turn to Black feminist literature, which grounds our understanding of how lived experience in the city can be both contextualized and critiqued. These writings help us recognize the ways dominant narratives of place-making often erase or distort our marginalized perspectives, while also affirming the value of embodied knowledge. Building on this grounding, we apply dance methods to gather information about the city's rhythms, flows, and choreographies, treating movement as both analytic and generative. We draw on dance as a method (Akinleye, 2023) because dance can be an embodied practice of the relational: a way of knowing that makes visible how our bodies carry and respond to ideas. Dance unfolds over time-space as recognizable patterns of relationship between, for instance, dancer, music, gravity, and other dancers. Dance practice understands movement itself as knowledge and knowledge-making. Dance methods allow us to perceive the city as

¹ We intentionally avoid the use of autoethnography. Autoethnography centers on the individual self-narrating their own lived experience. The notion of archive we are engaging is not just personal memory, it is a relational archive formed at the edge where your body meets other bodies, environments, infrastructures, and narratives. In this sense, the body-as-archive is not a personal record but a collective, relational one.

choreographed (Bingham-Hall & Cosgrave, 2019), a space of embodied experiences where rhythms, flows, and encounters are orchestrated through design and improvisation. Therefore, dance offers apparatus to explore how the city is experienced and felt. We have used dance to concentrate and express the felt experience of being present in the city. “This is not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of “it feels right to me.” We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared.” (Lorde, 1984, p. 42). From this prioritization of the sensation, we use the somatics of being-in-the-city, the felt experience (Akinleye, 2021), as the movement poetics of navigating the city. We suggest dance is to urban journeying, as poetry is to text. As we look for new framing and languaging for Urban Planners to tackle city-making. *‘And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry [/dance] which helps to fashion it. Poetry [/dance] is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives.’* (Lorde, 1984, p. 42). This allows us to acknowledge the multiplicity of sensations of everyday life, and the openness of cities (Sennett, 2018).

Given that the city holds traces of its past in the materiality of the built environment, we understand how the city can be conceived as an archive (Sheringham & Wentworth, 2016); however, our relational and embodied approach to the city challenges us to explore what we can learn through a focus on a somatic relationship with the city. This, we hope, could lead to new epistemologies and inclusive practices of city-making. If the city is understood as relational and embodied, then the ways we remember, record, and transmit its stories must also be rethought. Within this perspective, we recognize archives as a category that marks how memory and history are preserved, but we also ask where and how such archives are constituted. Our intention is not to critique why or how mainstream city archives are produced, but rather to question the notion of city archives as objects. Thus, we problematize when and where archives come into existence by suggesting that archives are constantly manifested through the relational encounters of the everyday. We suggest that there are multiple relationships that historicize the encounters between citizen and city on the physical bodies and structures of both. We describe this theoretical and philosophical framework as tentacular-feminine-body, that allows for this relational approach to the notion of archives, constituted through multiple encounters of citizen and city. This proposal of the tentacular-feminine-body as a methodology is the key finding we reflect upon in this paper. Through this methodological lens, we have come to understand the bodies of citizen/city as archive: a living site where the city’s choreographies are inscribed, remembered, and reimaged.

BUILDING METHODOLOGY: THE TENTACULAR-FEMININE-BODY

In introducing a methodological approach that we call the *tentacular-feminine-body*, we first offer a commentary on each of the capacities within the whole approach. Our emphasis on the relational means that ‘tentacular’, ‘feminine’, and ‘body’ function together as an interwoven matrix. Accordingly, below, we define the capacity of each term in reference to the interwoven whole. This ensures that ‘tentacular’, ‘feminine’, and ‘body’ are understood through their relational function rather than as three complete notions in themselves. In this way, we trace how the methodology gains meaning only through the larger weave they compose together.

Tentacular

We suggest the self is tentacular, in dialogue with the city through somatics, memories, social shifts, and proximities. The capacity tentacular indicates the complexity and multiplicity of connections a citizen makes within the city (Haraway, 2016; Ostendorf-Rodriguez, 2023). We suggest these connections inform the perception and experiences of movement around the city and where or where not a person is able to be present, feels safe, or feels they belong. These connections are the bridges of awareness that create the means of one’s presence.

The physical body of tentacularity is composed of nerve endings, and small hairs, for instance extending into the environment around reading temperature, texture: the somatic sensation of the environment in which one is present. The physicality of sensation is derived from the body’s extensions into the city. In the tentacular, we also acknowledge memory as another kind of tentacle: memories-creating bridges of meaning between the city and self. Memory is housed in how the body responds and moves (Van der Kolk, 2014). A third category of tentacles are the buffer spaces, the psychological extension of self in which *sensory shifts* (Hall, 1988) and meaning making are derived. All these types of tentacles construct the intimacy of the personal and the public experiences of the city: layered spatial relationships between self and the *things* of the city. *Tentacular-feminine-body* raises a self that extends into the city through nerve endings, hairs, memories, and psychic proximities; a body whose multiplicity of connections composes bridges of sensation and meaning between personal intimacy and the public architectures of belonging.

Feminine

We begin by constructing 'female' as a self-determined identity which is suspended across Western social constructs and binaries of women/man, weak/strong, body/mind, and unnatural/natural, all of which have historically been used to uphold cis-sexism and oppositional-misogyny (Serano, 2024). To avoid falling into a trap of oppositional-sexism and binaries, we acknowledge the action and processes of the feminine rather than suggesting feminine behaviour is biological. We are considering the *tentacular-feminine-body* to acknowledge that this work is about the action of exchange rather than about a biological subject.

We are led by Black feminists' thought, for instance, bell hooks' (hooks, 2000) emphasis on love as an ethic of care, attention, and relationality. Listening and nurturing are central to hooks' rethinking of what creates belonging (hooks, 2009). We follow Audre Lorde's framing of the erotic and the poetic as sources of power: receptive, relational, and life-affirming rather than controlling, valuing actions of listening, care, and holding multiplicity. Patrica Hill Collins describes the politics of care and the ethic of personal accountability (Hill Collins, 2009), both resonant with feminine action, rooted in lived experience and interconnection. We conceive of feminine actions as ways of being present in the city that emphasize connection, care, and openness rather than control or dominance. Therefore, feminine in the city is in actions such as stopping to listen to or understand another person. The temperament of weaving together different ideas or experiences so that they coexist rather than compete, in the construction of temporary hybrid spaces such as the multifunctional use of pushchair as a hybrid mobile home space, and a site of comfort or gentle touch caress a building wall to notice small details in the environment. These are ways of moving and relating that citizens can enact. We call them *feminine* because they affirm complexity, relation, and care as sources of strength. Often in the city, these actions can manifest a sense of vulnerability or openness, which can be misread or exploited within patriarchal logics as a kind of *asking for it*, revealing how feminine actions of care and receptivity are made precarious by structures of violence and misinterpretation (Serano, 2024). The *tentacular-feminine-body* describes the way reaching outward is lived as both choice and imposition, balancing vulnerability, uncertainty, strength, refusal, and presence; *tentacular-feminine-body* foregrounds the action of digestion of conditions into relational gestures.

Body

We conceive of the body as a part of the environment through the thinking processing of 'mind' and the sensation of surroundings. As we reject binary ideologies, we come from the ontological view that mind-body-environment are prismatic contours of meaning-making. The contour of 'the body' manifests as a sensor of space-time, mind-full, informed, shaped, and blended by environment. This is how we conceptualise the body as embodied, better phrased as emplaced (Casey, 2009; Howes, 2005; Pink, 2011), which 'suggests the sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment' (Howes, 2005, p.7). Too often, urban planning and design have treated bodies as passive figures rather than bodies as the processes for embodied, emplaced knowledge. This limits the environment to a codified space with pre-determined life, without acknowledging the substantive, emplaced differentiations archived in multiple encounters between city and citizens' bodies. The body in the '*tentacular-feminine-body*', is not a passive body. Rather, the body is an emplaced thinking sensor, a component of the larger citizenship that is a city: an emplaced sensor of space-time, where mind, soma, and environment are textures of the experience of the moment. Approaching the notion of citizens through the methodology of the *tentacular-feminine-body* allows us to look for emergent epistemologies from the body's prismatic contours, bearing multiple bodies in motion: of sensation, public life, and belonging. Thus, the *tentacular-feminine-body* is an emplaced, thinking sensor that resists reduction to fixed codes, instead they lived reciprocity of mind-body-environment, through which differentiated knowledges of the city are continually generated.

This methodological lens frames the citizen in layered fields of perception, memory, and imagination, folding past and future into presence. This lens calls for reflection on citizens as extended through the environment, tentacular and entangled, reaching to meet the world around them to co-create the meanings of their presence. The citizen is emplaced: experiencing felt meaning derived from being situated. This methodology addresses meaning as formed where body and city meet in mutual sensing. These edges extend, seek contact, shape meaning while being shaped back. Therefore, as we build this methodology, we understand the citizen as qualified by a tentacular process of presence. The *tentacular-feminine-body* conceptually recasts the boundary between the physical and socio-psychological dimensions and rejects the persistence gendered determination of needs and belongings in the city. By emphasising the dynamic and interconnectedness as well as the plurality of meanings and memories, *tentacular-feminine-body* acknowledges the possibility of archive as encounters within which collective perceptions of city can emerge.

USING DANCE AS METHOD

The process that has helped us manifest this shared methodological approach is using dance and choreography to concentrate on meaning through moving in the city. This is a practice-as/ research approach, suggesting that physically urban-journeying through the city reveals knowledge about the city. As our methodology emerges, dance continues to be a complementary method for the generation of ‘data’. Dance offers an extended vocabulary of movements. Traditionally, the role of dance in a research project is to demonstrate a finding. This leads to a dance in a city site as an end product, an idea a choreographer has illustrated through a dance-performance. In our collaboration, rather than using dance to illustrate an existing idea, we use dance as a collecting tool for generating experiences and thus meanings within the city. Dance for us becomes a method of engaging with the city through moving around it. Dance highlights the methodological approach of emplacement (Akinleye, 2023), in which the felt experience is situated and becomes comprehensible through processes of intra-action: through time-space as motion (Nail, 2024). Thus, we use the activity of dance as a tool for being physically and sensorially engaged with city: as a tool to become aware of our situatedness. That being so we are not using engaging, intricate, or complicated dance sequences. For the most part, our dances could appear to be ‘augmented’ walking. The method of dance involves the following principles for defining dance (Akinleye, 2021 p. 14). Dance is understood as movement for movement’s sake (Movement as an end in itself). Dance is understood as a reflective biological sensation. Dance is understood as multiple configurations (movement that moves from and to any possible configuration of itself). Using these definitions of dance, dance becomes a tool for relational noticing. It renders sense-ible and physically felt the existing rhythms and relationships of the city. In doing so, the dynamic web of the city can begin to be revealed. Our presence dancing becomes entangled in that web, and the dance becomes a visible trace of our attunement to it. In the case of this research, dance was moving around the city for the purpose of moving (rather than having to get to somewhere specific, for instance). This method engaged the sensorial affordances of dance through the somatic sensation of being present in the environment of the city.

Lastly, dancing moving around the city was led by engagement and exchange with the structures we encountered. We made use of movement scores² to give parameters to the dance. In our case, a movement score might be to move through an area asking *where do I tear the fabric of the city, and where does the fabric of the city tear me?* In this score for a dance, we paid attention to touch places, we saw steps or corners of buildings worn by human traffic. We also noticed sites that were rough to our skin. In dance, we looked for meaning by engaging with these places seeing how many ways we could move on them, give the weight of our body to them, take material weight from them, and read the marks that other people had left to understand what logics of engagement seem to be demonstrated through those marks. This method required us to keep reflective diaries, collected and practiced physical movements and shapes we experienced when engaging in the dances. We took photographs, created images (see [Figure 1 & 2](#)), and wrote thick descriptions as aide-memoires for the sensation of being present with city objects.

Figure 1

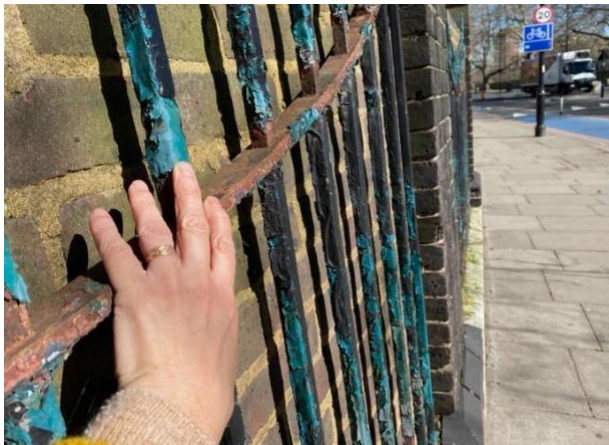
Image generated from the reflection of the authors in discussion with AI. 10/04/2025



² “A score is a guide for action, with varying degrees of prescriptiveness. A score is knowledge encoded in media – a guide for making music conceived by a composer in one context, read by a performer, and used by them as a prompt to do something that makes sense in their own context.” (Bingham-Hall, 2019)

Figure 2

Encountering the city. 15/04/2025. Credit: Akinleye



DISCUSSION: THREE QUESTION AREAS

Our interdisciplinary lens has created complications, such as finding funding. This led us to realise that a part of the research itself is articulating our interdisciplinary methodology, and the questions we seek to investigate (which we begin to do through this journal article). By developing a shared methodology, *tentacular-feminine-body*, we are at an exciting point in this interdisciplinary research. Thus, we have found the initial research process revealed itself, in part, through our explorations of how to articulate our shared questions of the city. These are questions we have in common yet have come about through our respective disciplines of urban studies and dance: which we see as two disciplines within a cluster of subjects engaged with spatial practices. Our goal as researchers in the humanities is to better understand the questions that drive a research project. We aim to research in order to better understand the nuances of our questions and to be led towards further inquiry. Within the creativity of urban design and dance, it is the process revealed by questions, not the product offered by answers, that illuminates the depth of our subjects: questions move us; answers settle us.

We write this paper to mark a point in our research. The “point” we have arrived at feels less like a milestone of completion and more like a threshold, a moment when the shape of the research, its identity, its gravity, and its direction begin to root themselves in the cross-pollination of urban studies and dance. It is a moment of emergence of methodology that leads to horizons that no longer appear scattered through being borrowed horizons from distinct disciplines. This is a moment of epistemic rooting: moving beyond the need to *justify* the interdisciplinary nature of the work and instead *inhabiting* it fully. A point where what was once “interdisciplinary” is now intra-disciplinary³, a relational subject that emerges through our shared questions, not external categories. Therefore, further ‘findings’ in this paper are *three areas of questions* that offer clarity through orientation rather than closure. They signal a threshold: from disciplinary navigation to embodied methodology. At this threshold, we recognise the notion of the *tentacular-feminine-body* as a concept for methodological encounter. This carries the research across disciplines, across bodies, across city, and self, threading the tactile with the conceptual. *Tentacular-feminine-body* is a figurative notion, not symbolic but sensorial, through which the boundary between subject and method dissolves. *Tentacular-feminine-body*, is a temporary conception for thinking and feeling through, existing between gesture and reflection. Thus, *tentacular-feminine-body* is the medium through which our research of the city breathes and reaches. *Tentacular-feminine-body* contextualises the conditions under which further questions of citizen/city arise. From this rooted threshold, we offer three questions that now guide the progression of our research.

Question of the grammar of the city

Through the intention of urban design, the city already offers a kind of spatial grammar (Hillier & Hanson, 1984; McKittrick, 2021; Sennett, 2018): a set of spatial, visual, and experiential rules that guide how the city is structured, perceived, and inhabited. Through this, underlying structures and intentions citizens’ movement is directed. Urban designs suggest syntax, a language of space, where choices create meaning, patterns, and possibilities for experiencing space. For instance, directing people past coffee shops in train station walkways gives the walkway a kind of syntax: a meaning for the movement that is carried out in it. To stop and stare at the

³ The use of the word intra-disciplinary is informed by Karen Barad, and the use of the term intra-action, to signify ‘the mutual constitution’ (Barad, 2007. p. 33)

ceiling in the walkway seems meaningless because it goes against the syntax of train/station/coffee movement. If we arrive in the station to carry out some dance choreography, a new syntax is overlaid on the walkway. For the period of the dance-choreography the logic of train/station/coffee is temporarily suspended, and the artistic rendering of the choreography brings different aspects of the design to the fore. Dance within urban design reveals a temporary new meaning arrangement that highlights certain aspects of the grammar of the design, while downplaying other aspects. This choreographic syntax responds to reframes and momentarily reshapes how we understand and engage with the environment (Akinleye, 2025). It raises questions about how the ontology of the city is crafted through its grammar and thus how the citizen is cast within that ontological paradigm. The cultural lens through which the city is experienced also nuances the syntax of the urban landscape. How we experience a city is given syntax by our Black and brown bodies every day. This includes the social anticipation of what our everyday presence means, and our learnt responses to how and when we can move within that social context as well as our own cultural meaning-making.

Our cultural lens and the lens society projects on how we are culturally identified are a part of the semantics of the city. Semantics are given syntax by movement. *Tentacular-feminine-body* begins to focus us on a sensorial web that ultimately navigates and connects geographies and materialities of the city while also responding to these multiple layers of syntax. In a sense, *tentacular-feminine-body* responds to and expands into memories and meanings as the city is traversed. Urban grammar can be resisted, adaptive, and contested. Through dance, new spatial imaginaries can emerge that resist hierarchical and rigid urban settings. *Tentacular-feminine-body* affords attention to an affective and atmospheric urban grammar which has an agency to mobilise. In our early explorations, urban grammar appears to be shaped and reshaped via multiple sensations, a construct between the body's materiality, ecology of the city, and citizen/city threshold of encounters. Leading us to these questions of the city as a dynamic porous threshold, space-time relations with cultural and political connotations. Questions that suggest city do not contain bodies, but relationships that activate or provoke tentacles. These questions of the grammar of the city examine how urban landscape is read and archived culturally and politically through movement. In our early investigations of the grammar of the city, we find our histories and notion of 'self' consciously rewritten, challenging the mainstream archives of our presence in the city.

Question of the feminine of the city

This question area begins with highlighting for us well researched existing issues of the daily experiences of feminine movement and presence in the city (Beebejaun, 2017; Criado Perez, 2019; Kern, 2020). These are questions activated by the persistence of injustices such as lack of cultural recognition, just distribution of resources, and equal participation in the decisions that shape the built environment (Fraser, 2013). This is rendered further by oppositional sexism that locks experience into a binary where the masculine is sought after and the feminine is defined by how it is not masculine (Serano, 2024). As a methodology, *tentacular-feminine-body* sustains the development of questions that highlight routes for noticing and foregrounding the relational and the receptive as generative forces through which the city itself is constituted. City then, is conceived of and interacted with as it meets, responds, and reaches, especially in how its grammar interacts with human movement. This generates questions that assume and mirror qualities often ascribed to the feminine in philosophical and ecological thought: receptivity as active and relational. The city does not simply hold or contain; it senses, shapes, and is shaped. This dynamic reciprocity aligns with epistemology often associated with the feminine, of care, touch, and co-creation. Our questions in this area lead us to consider how femininities' unspoken negotiations are archived as assertions, and reclamations that take place through multiple spatial encounters across different roles. *Tentacular-feminine-body* curates and mediates city as always being undone, reinterpreted, *danced* with, and continually archived. City through the lens of *tentacular-feminine-body* has the capacity to hold multiplicity, engage in reciprocity, and function as a site of encounter and transformation.

Our methodology acknowledges the possibility of exploring the city as dynamic, layered, porous, and situated in the relational. This methodological framework can offer allowances for recognising the city as engaged and present as an entity that receives, responds, refracts, and reaches. Moreover, questions of the feminine city emerge as a threshold space given shape by tentacle encounters. The spatial syntax of the city could be understood as both materially inscribed, through architecture and infrastructure, as well as culturally mediated, through social anticipation, racialized experience, and embodied memory. In this context, questions of the feminine city are critical orientations, a way of theorizing and practicing the city as a responsive ecology of relations, attentive to difference and the politics of presence.

Question of city archivist

In this research, bodies (human, architecture, and civic) in relation to each generate archival witnessing of their own presence. This archive is ephemeral, relational, and continuously reconstituted through movement,

encounter, and affect. City-body, public-body, and/or dancing-body store and express histories, temporalities, and social inscription through gesture, rhythm, posture, and refusal. This framing resonates with scholarship that treats the bodily as a mode of historical transmission, where bodies become sites of remembering, sensing, and re-inscribing lived experience (McKittrick, 2021). The human body, particularly racialized and female-gendered (such as our own), carries social anticipation and structural inscription, while also enacting modes of resistance and reconfiguration through tentacular responses and reaches. City-body, likewise, is an architectural archive of movement patterns, exclusions, migrations, and spatial grammar. To dance within the city is to activate these archives. Dance becomes a method of archival engagement, reading, reinterpreting, and sometimes rewriting the embodied memory held by the urban landscape. *Tentacular-feminine-body* methodology enters into dialogue with layers of history, power, and presence, raising the felt, which might otherwise shape but remain inarticulate as a responsive cue. Then the archival is not understood as a bounded past but as a living, moving, and co-created present, continuously shaped by the interrelation of bodies, structures, and atmospheric cues.

We conceive of the city as responsive, framed through the methodology of *tentacular-feminine-body*. In this, all bodies are archival, created through the archiving of the sensorial and of responses to the sensorial: tentacularly reaching, remembering, and reforming through entangled relations, movements, and perceptions. City echoes, conducts, reflects, and co-creates the archive that forms citizens: each encounter, each architectural texture, each movement across them, citizen/city becomes part of a sensorial memory, a response woven into form. The city is forever entangled in the bodies that move through it and the grammar that shape it. The urban archive is the living relationship between citizen and city, where encounters, textures, and movements leave embodied traces. *Tentacular-feminine-body* archivist advances the relational as a design resource composed of sensation, memory, and proximity. The methodological *tentacular-feminine-body* allows us to consider how design might be informed by collaborative archives of the continual relational weave of citizen/city.

CONCLUSION

Exhale into the city now, no longer only place but moving within it, tentacular, responsive, entangled. Our research offers a way to trace and to respond. Through breath, gesture, and proximity, the syntax of design overlays a temporary arrangement of meaning onto the site of *tentacularity*. This meaning arises from the entanglements of the material and the ephemeral, the human and the more-than-human, the built and the sensed. City's grammar reconfiguring us, but our tentacular-feminine-body is not a metaphor, it is a method—an epistemic vehicle through which sensation becomes knowledge. It becomes a way to know and to remember Place. Our questions remain open, stretching forward, like tentacles shaping the possibilities of belonging through motion. However, our interest now is in how we create from within the spaces our questions illuminate.

I breathe in the cool March air of North West London as I step through the train tube doors onto a quiet platform. After months away, this moment is the first when my body reaches into fully drinks in my presence here, back in London. The hair on my arms quiver at a growing breeze—a particular tinge of damp cold that bathes the pores of my brown skin in recognition. My body, an archive of the sensorial, responds instinctively to the city's atmospheric cues: a familiarity I relax into. I struggle with the weight of my bags as I ascend the stairs from the platform. Someone almost runs into me, transfixed on the train about to leave, a choreography of urban movement that underscores the station's spatial grammar. The street tickles my nose follicles, an archive of aroma: past memories of traffic on thousands of roads crossed, chips eaten late at night, Buddleia flowering in the cracks of city walls, and the early morning scent of commuters that have pushed past me to the tube system with damp hair and hot coffee. These scents and sensations are tentacular extensions of the city's body, reaching into mine, entwining our shared histories. As people push past me, with my heavy case, ascending into the London morning, I remember myself here. I remember my Place: my presence, fragilities, refusals, joys: sensations contribute to an ever-evolving archive, a testament to the unfolding process of tentacular potentiality.

Acknowledgement

The co-editors of the special issue would like to thank Prof. Sally R Munt and Dr. Rose Richards for their patient guidance and mentoring through the various stages of this special issue. We would also like to thank Ms. Kelsey Stanfield, Radhika's research assistant at BGSU, for her assistance, and for being a sound board, as we put together this special issue.

Funding

No external funding was received for this research.

Ethical statement

As a theoretical article, activity was except from IRB

Competing interests

There are no competing interests associated with this research and article.

Author contributions

The authors contributed equally to this work.

Data availability

As a theoretical article does not engage a data set.

AI disclosure

No AI tool was used to generate, analyse, or interpret any substantive content of this manuscript.

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Research paper

Notes on Carrying: A Feminist Approach to the Critical Spatial Practice of Everyday Life in Urban China

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

Citation: Li, X. (2026). Notes on carrying: A feminist approach to the critical spatial practice of everyday life in urban China. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(2), Article 28. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/19076>

Published: 27 August 2026

ABSTRACT

This study pays close attention to the notion of carrying in dense urban China to understand how urban space is sustained and reshaped through ordinary, embodied actions of everyday life. Drawing on six months of ethnographic fieldwork in a residential neighbourhood in Beijing, it traces carrying practices across the domains of 衣食住行 (clothing, food, dwelling, and transport), attending to how gendered bodies experience, use, occupy, move and redefine urban spaces. The article argues that critical spatial practice in contemporary urban China extends beyond architectural design and formal planning, emerging through everyday practices of occupation, movement, and maintenance. By conceptualising carrying as both a feminist analytical lens and a methodological approach, it foregrounds the relational dynamics between bodies, objects, and the built environment, and rethinks urban space as a dynamic assemblage continuously reconfigured through the cumulative effects of everyday life.

Keywords: feminist spatial practice, gendered body, the notion of carrying, ethnographic research, urban China

In the corner of my home, there is a growing pile of plastic bags and container boxes that have accumulated over the years. They come from grocery shopping, shipping packages, or promotional gifts from vendors. Placed in a space that is inconspicuous yet easily accessible, these bags are always within reach—ready to be used for carrying things when leaving the house or for storing items within it. This small yet familiar domestic phenomenon, common in many households, reveals how carrying technologies are deeply embedded in everyday life. Yet, much like that unnoticed pile of bags tucked away in a corner, the significance of carrying remains undervalued and overlooked (Le Guin et al., 2019).

To carry is to live. Feminist scholars have long drawn attention to the hidden and undervalued labour that sustains life, including acts of cleaning, repairing, maintaining, and caring that reproduce both households and cities (Bloomer, 1994; Kasstan & Crook, 2018; Rendell, 2018; Ukeles, 1969). Drawing on feminist spatial thinking, which has for decades argued that space is gendered, embodied, relational, and produced through everyday practices (Kern, 2020; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1994; Puwar, 2004; Young, 1980), this study foregrounds a specific spatial practice of everyday life: carrying. Carrying is used here as a conceptual and methodological lens through which to examine the dynamic relationships between gendered bodies and urban space.

In everyday urban life, carrying takes multiple forms: transporting groceries from local markets, accompanying children and elderly family members, moving water, waste, or recycled materials, delivering goods, or holding

personal belongings while navigating dense streets and public transport. These practices are ordinary and repetitive, yet central to the organisation and sustenance of urban life. In this paper, carrying is understood as a feminist spatial practice for three interrelated reasons. First, carrying is deeply entangled with reproductive and care labour that has historically been feminised and rendered invisible, despite its essential role in sustaining everyday life (Le Guin et al., 2019). Second, carrying foregrounds the body as a site of spatial production, drawing attention to how weight, effort, posture, rhythm, and fatigue shape how space is navigated, inhabited, and endured. Third, carrying destabilises rigid distinctions between public and private, productive and reproductive, as it frequently unfolds across thresholds—between home and street, market and neighbourhood, work and care (Jones, 2024; Otter, 2024). Carrying emerges through the relational assemblage of the carrier, the carried, and the tools that enable it—such as bags, carts, baskets, and trolleys—linking gendered bodies to surrounding infrastructures and environments (Angerer et al., 2024; Sofoulis, 2000).

Based on feminist spatial theory, the notion of carrying, in this paper, is unpacked through two interwoven layers of meaning. First, it refers to the bodily, spatial activities that gendered bodies perform in daily urban life to gather, hold, and transport objects, resources, bodies, and beings. The spatial acts are deeply embedded in the details of daily life and are often feminised, as they align with gendered expectations of care and domestic responsibility (Choi et al., 2022; Larrington-Spencer et al., 2024). The second layer of meaning extends beyond the transportation of physical items. Carrying also encompasses a metaphorical and affective dimension—a subtle, often unconscious process through which bodies and their spatial extensions carry identities, memories, lived experiences, social relations, and traces of everyday life (Puwar, 2021; Sofoulis, 2000). In this sense, bodies in urban environments function as containers of political, social, cultural, and temporal entanglements (Bloomer, 1994; Puwar, 2021). Taken together, these two layers position carrying not as a singular or exceptional practice, but as a particularly revealing form of everyday spatial practice through which gendered bodies negotiate urban life. Like other ordinary practices—such as waiting, caring, maintaining, or repairing—carrying participates in the ongoing production of urban space. Its analytical value lies in how it makes visible the quiet, accumulative processes through which everyday actions of moving, holding, and sustaining gradually reshape urban life and transform urban spaces over time (Bloomer, 1994; Petrescu, 2023; Zhou, 2020).

This research is grounded in the phenomenology of urban China. As urban China undergoes a profound transformation—from macro-scale planning to residents' everyday experiences, from large-scale development to reconstructing spaces centring the rhythms of daily life—everyday practices have become increasingly central to how cities are produced and experienced (Chai et al., 2003; Cheng, 2021; 孙道胜 & 柴彦威, 2020). Within this shifting urban context, Chinese scholarship and planning practice have increasingly turned to feminist theory and feminist spatial practice as potential frameworks for addressing questions of everyday life, care, and embodied experience in urban environments. Such as studies on the design strategy of the women-friendly city (李昱萱 et al., 2025), the incorporation of gender-sensitive perspectives into urban design (Qin, 2019), and urban public space design informed by feminist geography or feminist approaches (Chai et al., 2003; Huang & Xu, 2025). However, many current studies in China tends to treat feminism as an added principle or policy layer within urban planning and design, rather than examining how urban space is transformed through the everyday interactions of gendered bodies. As a result, feminist engagement with urban space is often framed as an abstract design ideal, rather than as a situated, lived, and relational process emerging from everyday urban life in China.

Against this background, this article seeks to address this gap by situating carrying within the framework of feminist spatial practice and examining its significance for understanding urban regeneration and transformation in China. Carrying, in this context, emerges as a specific everyday practice that reveals how gendered bodies negotiate transforming urban spaces and everyday life. Drawing on ethnographic observations in a residential neighbourhood in Beijing, it asks: *What can carrying reveal about the relationality between bodies and urban space in contemporary China? And how might attending to carrying reframe our understanding of feminist spatial practice and critical urban theory?* By focusing on the most essential acts that sustain urban life—those captured in the Chinese notion of 衣食住行 (yī shí zhù xíng, the four fundamental aspects of living: clothing, food, dwelling, and transport)—this study foregrounds carrying as a feminist spatial practice. It argues that carrying sustains life, blurs the boundaries between public and private, and reconfigures urban environments from the ground up, revealing a relational, embodied, and feminist mode of spatial production in dense urban China.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Gendered bodies and feminist spatial theory

“(I)f the body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects” (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 45). In *The Second Sex* (2011), Simone de Beauvoir argues that the female body is not just a biological organism, but a social and existential situation, which is constituted through historically sedimented meanings, social norms, and the lived experiences of navigating a world that positions women as “the Other”. The

body becomes a locus where social structures and gender norms are inscribed, shaping how one moves through space, inhabits time, and engages with material and symbolic worlds. In a world shaped by and for men, de Beauvoir criticises, the masculine body is assigned as “a direct and normal link with the world” — a transparent medium through which action and meaning unfold. In contrast, the female body is historically configured as “an obstacle, a prison, burdened by everything that particularises it”— something that hinders rather than enables connection with and mastery over the material world (2011, p. 5). To her, the relations between the body and the material world are not neutral or given; they are inherently gendered. However, in contrast to the rationalised and prioritised positioning of the male body in relation to the material world, the socio-spatial relations of the female body — her ways of understanding, connecting with, and shaping the world — have been persistently marginalised, constrained within “the prison” of her body.

Drawing upon de Beauvoir’s existentialism and phenomenology lens of feminist thinking, Iris Marion Young, in her *Throwing Like a Girl* (1980), shifts the focus toward “the situatedness of the woman’s actual bodily movement and orientation to its surroundings and its world”, tracing “the basic modalities of feminine body comportment, manner of moving, and relation in space” (p. 139). She critiques the tendency to overlook gendered bodies’ actual bodily movement and orientation in space. Leslie Kern’s *Feminist City* (2020) further explores the gendered body’s relationship to urban space by depicting real-life scenarios in which women navigate the city with a heightened sense of caution, constantly modifying their routes, bodily posture, and rhythms of movement in response to perceived threats, unwanted attention, or infrastructural inadequacies. Whether it’s mothers manoeuvring prams on inaccessible public transport, women shrinking their physical presence on crowded buses, using headphones to deter unwanted interactions in public spaces, or avoiding walking alone on sidewalks at night, Kern shows how everyday movement is shaped by gendered expectations and the failure of urban environments to account for diverse bodily needs. Their works open up a vital feminist approach to critical spatial practice in urban environments—one that understands the body’s movements, orientations, and burdens as central to how gendered space is experienced, negotiated, and potentially transformed.

Western feminist theory has long grappled with how gendered bodies come to be shaped by, and respond to, the built environment and social norms. Both Simone de Beauvoir and Iris Marion Young foreground the ways in which bodily experience is conditioned by material and cultural surroundings, highlighting how gender is inscribed onto the body through its spatial and social positioning. As de Beauvoir famously states, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 283). Through their arguments, the female body is reconceptualised not as a fixed entity or being defined by her biological features, rather as a “situation” composed by historical configurations, social and cultural norms, and the embodied experience of moving through a gendered world.

However, emerging at the intersections of feminism, geography, architecture, and urban studies, feminist spatial theory extends the existing feminism by asking not only how environments define gendered bodies, but also how space itself is gendered – constructed through human behaviours, power relations, and socio-spatial practices of everyday life (Massey, 1994; Rendell, 2018; Sofoulis, 2000; Star, 1999). In this paper, feminist spatial practice is defined as a critical way of thinking and doing that explores how gendered bodies engage with, inhabit, and transform their surrounding spaces through everyday activities. It recognises space as both a material and symbolic construct, continuously produced and redefined through embodied experiences and social relations. For instance, Kern’s *Feminist City* (2020) illustrates the challenges and difficulties female bodies face while navigating through the urban environments that are originally set up to facilitate men’s activities and movements. Jane Rendell (2019) introduces the concept of critical spatial practice, which foregrounds the interrelations between theory and practice, private and public, and gender and space, as a means to question and intervene in existing spatial orders. Similarly, Zoë Sofoulis (2000, 2024) uses the notion of container technologies to examine how spaces are not only gendered in their design but also in their use, often reinforcing traditional gender roles through everyday spatial practices. These feminist spatial thinkers advance an approach to studying space that begins with the gendered body and extends to its surrounding environment, proposing that the ways in which gendered bodies navigate, use, and experience space actively influence and reshape the very spaces they inhabit, demonstrating that space itself is gendered.

Feminist spatial practice in urban China and assemblage of everyday life

Since the late 20th century, many Western theories on gender and space—such as feminist geography, feminist urbanism, and critical spatial theory—have been introduced into China and have influenced urban research and practice (Huang & Xu, 2025; Wang & Li, 2020). These frameworks offer valuable insights, but scholars have increasingly recognised that the particularities of Chinese urban environments—shaped by local culture, social organisation, and governance—cannot simply adopt Western theoretical models wholesale. There is a clear need to develop a China-specific framework that accounts for these contextual conditions (Chai et al., 2003). After rapid economic and urban development, Chinese cities are entering a new stage characterised by a shift “从宏观的形

态与功能原则走向微观的居民生活，从大规模的开发建设走向存量的优化，从注重物质空间建设到日常生活空间的关注” (from macro-scale form and functional planning toward residents’ everyday life, from large-scale new development to optimisation of existing stock, and from an emphasis on material space to attention to spaces of daily living) (孙道胜 & 柴彦威, 2020, p. 1). This transition highlights the importance of examining how urban life is actually experienced and reproduced on the ground. As a result, there is a pressing need for research that attends to Chinese urban daily life and its situated feminist spatial practices in order to understand the dynamic relations between gendered bodies and urban space.

To address feminist spatial practice in urban China, it is important to acknowledge the distinct development of feminist studies in modern China, which diverges significantly from the trajectories of Western feminist theory. Rooted deeply in the political, economic, and military conditions of the twentieth century, Chinese feminism emerged through state-led institutions that promoted gender equality as a central component of socialist modernisation (Wang, 2016). This was exemplified by Chairman Mao’s well-known proclamation that “women hold up half the sky” (妇女能顶半边天), which signalled the Party’s commitment to mobilising women into the labour force and public life. The dominant representation of modern Chinese women was therefore often aligned with the image of the female worker or peasant (工农妇女), reflecting the ideological emphasis on women’s contributions to industrial and agricultural production. According to the World Bank Group’s Gender Data Portal, from 1990 to 2024, China’s female labour force participation rate has consistently remained above 50 per cent, only around ten percentage points lower than that of men, and higher than the average for upper-middle-income countries and the global rate. However, the same data also reveal that women in China spend 2.6 times as many hours on unpaid domestic and care work as men. This paradox illustrates a persistent dual burden: while Chinese women have long been mobilised into the labour force and public life, they remain disproportionately responsible for the invisible labour of sustaining households and everyday life. From a feminist spatial perspective, these data suggest that women in China remain more closely tied than men to spaces associated with domesticity and the sustenance of everyday life (张云华 & 吴嘉, 2024; 李昱萱 et al., 2025). However, the labour and practices produced within these spaces are persistently undervalued, as they lack conventional economic valuation and are commonly excluded from dominant definitions of “work” (Chenghua & Ling, 2023; Hall, 2020; 张云华 & 吴嘉, 2024). As a result, such spatial practices are rarely recognised as gendered forms of labour, despite their central role in reproducing urban life and enabling the functioning of the formal economy.

Despite official campaigns for gender equality, domestic and care labour remains under-recognised. Archival research by Wang Zheng (2010) shows that early women’s publications, such as *Women of China* (《中国妇女》), almost entirely excluded depictions of women’s everyday domestic lives, including childcare, elder care, and cooking. Ethnographic research confirms that these responsibilities continue to be disproportionately borne by women (Acar et al., 2025). Through in-depth conversations with 40 women in urban China, Larrington-Spencer et al. (2024) reveal that women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of domestic and caregiving responsibilities. Drawing on Chinese traditional “gendered roles with *nei* (inside) and *wai* (outside)”, which designate the home (considering ‘*nei*’) as the woman’s domain and the public sphere (considering ‘*wai*’) as the man’s, her research shows how domestic and care labour remains overwhelmingly feminised (p. 5). As Larrington-Spencer et al. (2024) argue, “traditional gendered divisions of labour remained unchanged for many women,” reinforcing a model in which feminist progress is permitted without addressing home and care responsibilities (p. 5).

From a feminist spatial perspective, these everyday practices—caring for children and elderly, preparing food, or managing household resources—constitute significant forms of labour that shape the social, material, and temporal dynamics of urban environments. Although informal and often undervalued, this labour actively configures neighbourhoods and urban spaces. Scholars such as Bloomer (1994) and Ukeles (1969) have argued that domestic and maintenance labour—cleaning, mending, carrying, sustaining—are foundational spatial acts that reorder space, sustain life, and anchor memory (Daly et al., 2020). In the Chinese urban context, similar practices—carrying groceries from markets, transporting laundry to communal drying areas, escorting children to school—intertwine bodies, tools, infrastructure, and social relations, producing a continuous assemblage of everyday life.

This paper argues that practices of domestic care and everyday maintenance constitute a critical site for feminist inquiry in urban China. Their absence from official narratives is not simply a historical oversight but reflects persistent spatial hierarchies, in which the often-invisible activities that sustain life are devalued in favour of visible acts of production. These modest, everyday practices reveal the assemblage of urban life as a continual negotiation among gendered bodies, material technologies, infrastructures, and temporal rhythms (Ho, 2018; Larrington-Spencer et al., 2024; Liu, 2024; Happel-Parkins et al., 2024). By attending to these gestures, feminist spatial practice in urban China is understood not as a fixed category of design or theory but as an ongoing, embodied process—one that resists erasure, redistributes spatial meaning, and anchors the lived assemblage of the city.

The notion of carrying

In *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1988), Ursula K. Le Guin argues that perhaps the first tool invented by the human race was not a weapon, a tool for hunting and killing, but rather, a tool or technology for containing and carrying. Yet, as Le Guin (1988) points out that the stories of carrying remain largely absent: “We’ve heard it, we’ve all heard all about all the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the contained” (p. 167). More than thirty years after its initial publication, this essay by Le Guin was reprinted as a book, this time with an introduction by Donna Haraway (2019). In her introduction, Haraway shares three Mochilas she received in Colombia from her local women friends, along with the stories they carried—how local women shape their lives through carrying and transforming their narratives by creating their own bags. Through them, she showed readers how people are already writing and weaving alternative narratives and worlds by living with their lives and troubles. She reminds us that the stories of carrying are all around us, embedded in everyday life, and hold the potential to alter the world.

The notion of carrying is intricately entangled with feminist spatial practice. Le Guin (2019) starts her *Carrier Bag Theory* by gearing towards the gathering, containing, holding, and carrying – seeds, fruits, food, babies, and stories – practices that sustain everyday lives and offer care. Similarly, Zoë Sofoulis (2000, 2024), analyses “container technologies,” noting how domestic objects designed to hold, store, or carry shape women’s management of household and familial spaces. These acts of containment and carrying are not merely functional; they actively mediate gendered identities, social relations, and embodied experiences. The acts of carrying are embedded, embodied practices that shape gendered bodies’ experiences of space, movement, and care (Kern, 2020; Young, 1990).

This study conceptualises carrying as a specific type of feminist spatial practice linking the carrier, the carried, and the technologies and labour involved (Angerer et al., 2024; Sofoulis, 2000). Carrying is both spatial and relational, mediating between bodies, urban infrastructures, and daily life. While existing literature is largely grounded in Western contexts, the concept of carrying in Chinese urban and cultural settings remains underexplored, presenting both a challenge and an opportunity for this research.

In current Chinese urban studies, carrying is typically conceptualised through technocratic and ecological lenses, most notably in discussions of urban carrying capacity. This refers to the quantitative assessment of how much population, activity, or infrastructure a city or environment can support without degradation (Cao et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020; Wu & Peng, 2017). Within such frameworks, carrying is treated as a technical problem of spatial limits, resource efficiency, and policy optimisation. This research, however, reimagines carrying from a feminist perspective that emphasises the relational dynamics between gendered body and urban infrastructure. Situated at the intersection of gender and socio-spatial relations, this approach views carrying not merely as a capacity or function but as a continuous, dynamic process—one that reveals urban spaces as active, lived environments rather than passive containers. These spaces bear the daily movements, practices, and social-spatial entanglements of their inhabitants (Beebejaun, 2017; Kern, 2020).

In *Carrying as Method*, Puwar (2021) introduces the notion of carrying as a methodological framework to explore how researchers and bodies transmit experiences, histories, and influences across time, space, and generations. She connects the concept of carrying to the body, positioning it as an archival site that holds and expresses non-verbal, affective, and gestural forms of knowledge. Carrying, in her account, operates metaphorically—describing how bodies subconsciously bear identities, memories, lived experiences, and traces of everyday life through their movements, comportments, and presence. While Puwar focuses on this metaphorical and affective register, my research departs from the physical and material acts of carrying performed by gendered bodies in urban space. I foreground the spatial and social dimensions of these acts, using them to investigate the relational entanglements between bodily practice, urban space, and everyday life in contemporary China.

In dense urban China, the relationality between urban inhabitants and urban spaces is intricate and ever-changing, and this dynamic is closely intertwined with the everyday practices of its inhabitants (Zhou, 2020). Urban spaces are constantly used, influenced, made, unmade, and remade by their inhabitants (Ho, 2018; Mangurian & Ray, 2009; Xue et al., 2025). Through the notion of carrying, this article uncovers the everyday narratives of urban China, illuminating how carrying intricately links urban inhabitants and urban spaces together. This study foregrounds carrying as a vital practice, an “(inter-)active process” that reveals the interdependencies between urban inhabitants and urban spaces, offering a feminist spatial perspective on how carrying operates as a method of engaging with and understanding urban life (Jones, 2024; Puwar, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study addresses the limited understanding of how urban environments in China are lived, negotiated, and reshaped through the movements of gendered subjects. To explore this, I adopt a feminist methodological

approach in which carrying functions as both a conceptual lens and a research framework. It highlights the relational dynamics between bodies, objects, and urban space, showing how these interactions incrementally shape and transform the built environment.

To investigate daily carrying practices, I conducted six months of ethnographic fieldwork in a dense residential neighbourhood in Beijing. I combined participant observation, walking, and immersion in everyday routines, accompanying residents to markets, schools, and communal courtyards, and attending closely to bodily gestures, movement rhythms, and the objects they carried. Daily fieldnotes recorded actions, social interactions, spatial arrangements, and informal adaptations to infrastructure.

My methodology also included sketching, photography, and storytelling to capture the relational and material dimensions of carrying. Engaging as both observer and embodied participant allowed me to experience how bodies negotiate space, care, and adaptation—practices often overlooked in formal urban analysis. The resulting narratives and visual records trace how carrying connects people, objects, and infrastructures across the home, neighbourhood, and city.

This approach aligns with feminist methodologies that treat the body as a site of knowledge production (Beebejaun, 2017; Puwar, 2021). Carrying is not merely descriptive; it serves as a feminist method of critical spatial practice, revealing the rhythms of everyday life, the labour of care, and the ongoing negotiation of urban space in contemporary China.

STORIES OF CARRYING

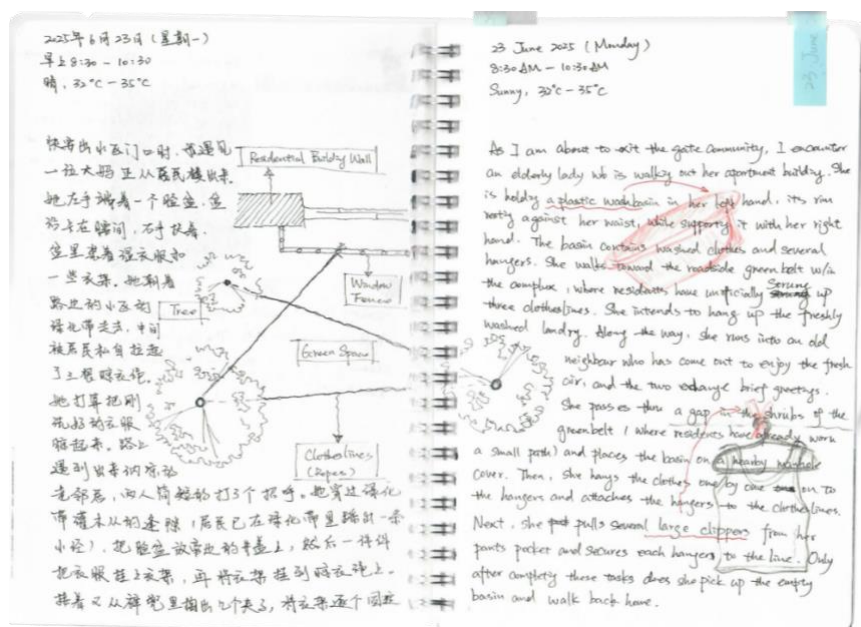
My field site is a residential neighbourhood in northern Beijing that accommodates a diverse mix of urban inhabitants, including long-term residents, rural-to-urban migrants, and people of different ages, occupations, and social backgrounds. The neighbourhood comprises a range of residential compounds alongside community infrastructures such as schools, markets, and small businesses that support residents' everyday needs. In such a setting, carrying practices are both intensive and indispensable for sustaining daily life. A traditional Chinese phrase, 衣食住行 (*yī shí zhù xíng*), encapsulates the four essential aspects of living: clothing, food, dwelling, and transportation. Based on my ethnographic observations, carrying practices play a crucial role in all of these domains.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I closely traced residents' carrying activities on a near-daily basis, collecting multiple stories by accompanying individuals as they moved through their daily routines and navigated the neighbourhood's spaces. These encounters revealed not only the material and practical dimensions of carrying but also the ways in which personal experiences and embodied movements continually reshape the surrounding environment. To illustrate this, I have selected four stories from my ethnographic fieldnotes, each corresponding to one of the four "essential aspects of everyday living," to show how carrying sustains and redefines urban life in practice.

楼宇间的晾衣线 (Clotheslines between buildings)

Figure 1

Fieldnotes taken by the author on 23 June 2025



Fieldnotes, 23 June 2025:

As I am about to exit the gated community, I encounter an elderly woman who is walking out her apartment building. She is holding a plastic washbasin in her left hand, its rim resting against her waist, while supporting it with her right hand. The basin contains washed clothes and several hangers. She walks toward the roadside greenbelt within the complex, where residents have unofficially strung up three clotheslines. She intends to hang up the freshly washed laundry. Along the way, she runs into an old neighbour who has come out to enjoy the cool air, and the two exchange brief greetings. She passes through a gap in the shrubs of the greenbelt (where residents have already worn a small path) and places the basin on a nearby manhole cover. Then, she hangs the clothes one by one onto the hangers and attaches the hangers to the clothesline. Next, she pulls several large clips from her pants pocket and secures each hanger to the line. Only after completing these tasks does she pick up the empty basin and walk back home.

The fieldnote (Figure 1) example above captures the details of local residents carrying laundry, a practice repeated by many people on every sunny day and seamlessly woven into the rhythms of everyday life in urban China.

During my fieldwork in Beijing, I walked through numerous gated communities (小区, *Xiǎo Qū* in Chinese), and almost all of them contain multiple self-installed clotheslines as well as communal laundry drying areas set up by the local community committee. Self-installed clotheslines—strung between trees, lampposts, window railings, or fences—have been a familiar feature of urban residential life for as long as I can remember. In recent years, many compounds have gradually added formal communal drying areas. These facilities are usually initiated and organised by local community Party organisations and funded through “community service” budgets, with informational signs indicating which Party body constructed them and under what budget.

For many urban residents in China, drying laundry is not confined to the domestic interior. To speed up drying and based on the widespread belief that sunlight disinfects and sterilises, residents routinely take freshly washed laundry outdoors. However, many modern residential compounds did not originally include designated communal drying areas. Consequently, residents improvise, setting up clotheslines on trees, lampposts, window railings, and perimeter fences. Over time, the widespread presence of these self-installed lines has drawn the attention of neighbourhood committees, prompting the later creation of formal communal drying areas. Even so, privately installed clotheslines remain in active use, producing a layered everyday landscape in which new and old infrastructures, formal and informal practices, coexist and intertwine. This everyday negotiation between personal habit and communal facilities illustrates how urban residents actively shape and adapt their environments, revealing the subtle yet pervasive ways in which everyday practices configure urban space in contemporary Beijing.

早市² (Grocery shopping and the morning market)

Figure 2

Fieldnotes taken by the author on 16 July 2025



¹ *Xiǎo Qū* (小区) refers to the residential community in China, typically consisting of multiple apartment buildings grouped within a defined, often gated area. These communities can vary in size and may include amenities such as parks, shops, and communal spaces, creating a distinct, self-contained environment for residents.

² *Zǎo Shì* (早市) refers to the early morning farmers' market, which is a temporary space set up each morning in the market's parking lot, where local vendors gather to sell fresh vegetables and fruits. Once the market closes, vendors pack up any remaining goods into their trucks, and the space is cleared out, returning to its function as a parking lot.

Fieldnotes, 02 November 2025:

An elderly woman holding two large napa cabbages in her arms, on her way home, runs into another elderly woman at the entrance of their building. The two stop and chat casually.

"Did you go buy cabbages?"

"Indeed. Are you heading out?"

"We were just about to go for a walk"... "Oh! Why didn't you take out the trash?" The woman about to leave suddenly calls out loudly to her husband, who had just stepped outside. The old man pauses, then turns back to grab the trash bag left by the door.

"Can't remember a thing—I clearly put it right here," the woman mutters softly, shaking her head.

"Your cabbages look really good—so firm. Now that the weather's getting cooler, we should also stock up on some."

"Yes, many households have started storing winter cabbages in the stairwell or along the building walls, so I bought some too."

"That's good, that's good. We'll also take a stroll to the market, pick some up, so we can make dumplings and minced filling later."

In the shared spaces of the multi-unit residential buildings (单元楼, DānYuánLóu³ in Chinese), such as stairwells and corridor walls, it is common to see personal belongings occupying these areas. Children's toys, cleaning tools such as mops and brooms, bicycles and scooters, and—as in the case described above—winter cabbages stored on or beside mailboxes, frequently appear in these semi-public spaces (Figure 3).

Such practices are often framed in public discourse as "social ills" or undesirable behaviours that misuse communal space and disrupt order (澎湃新闻, 2026). Others, however, view them as largely harmless and even as expressions of the everyday liveliness of life, revealing the warmth and density of lived urban experience. Rather than adjudicating whether these practices are right or wrong, this article approaches them as an urban phenomenon that merits careful attention.

Seen through a feminist and phenomenological lens, the presence of personal items in shared residential spaces signals how dwelling extends beyond the private interior of the home. Stairwells and corridors function not only as circulation spaces but as thresholds of everyday life, where domestic activities overflow into collective environments. These material traces—cabbages awaiting storage, tools left within reach, toys temporarily abandoned—carry the rhythms of care, maintenance, and seasonal preparation into shared space, shaping the atmosphere of dwelling.

Rather than being passive backdrops, these shared spaces are continuously produced through everyday practices of placing, storing, carrying, and retrieving. Such acts reveal how urban residents actively negotiate limited domestic space and daily labour, particularly in older residential buildings where storage and living space are constrained. In this sense, what is often dismissed as disorder or informality can be understood as a situated response to material conditions, and as part of the lived spatial logic of urban China.

早高峰中的小电驴 (*E-scooters in the morning rush*)

Figure 4

Fieldnotes taken by the author on 26 June 2025



³ DānYuánLóu (单元楼) is a specific residential building type common in urban China, referring to a multi-storey apartment building divided into several "units" and each organised around a shared stairwell (and sometimes a lift). Each unit typically serves a small number of households per floor, with apartments accessed from a common stair landing.

Fieldnotes, 26 June 2025:

Just after seven in the morning, during the morning rush hour around the residential neighbourhood, the main roads are crowded with vehicles, and the bicycle lanes are busy with a continuous flow of e-bikes, private bicycles, and shared bikes moving quickly through the traffic. This time of day is particularly congested near middle and high schools, as many parents are dropping off their children. Since cars are not allowed to stop for long periods at school gates, many parents choose to park a little further away and let their children walk the remaining distance into the campus. Many students also ride bicycles to school, carrying their schoolbags either on their shoulders or in the front baskets of their bikes. I saw a father and his daughter each riding a shared bike—the daughter in front, the father following closely behind. At the school gate, the daughter parked her bike by the roadside, and the father took the schoolbag out of his basket and handed it to her. Only after seeing her enter the school did he turn and ride off, preparing to transfer to the subway. Around eight o'clock, more young parents on e-bikes appear in the bicycle lanes. They carry their children in small seats attached between their legs, taking them to elementary schools or kindergartens. Passing by a nearby kindergarten, I encountered two older women, one of whom was pulling a small toy pedal car. Each carried a tote bag on her shoulder; they seemed to have just dropped off their grandchildren and were now walking back together. They chatted and laughed as they made their way to a nearby morning market, strolling slowly along the stalls and selecting fresh vegetables. As their tote bags gradually filled with produce, the woman hung the items that no longer fit on the toy pedal car, pulling and pushing it along as she continued shopping.

In Beijing, the busiest routes during rush hour are often those surrounding schools. Outside the school gates, the morning scene repeats in variations: parents arrive on foot, on bicycles, or on scooters, slowing down to hand over bags, adjust collars, or watch their children disappear into the schoolyard. These exchanges are brief yet intimate—a fleeting moment in which the domestic life of the household intersects with public space. Within minutes, the street transforms again. Parents remount their bikes or scooters, now without children but still bearing the responsibilities of work, errands, or the next stage of their day.

In this context, multiple forms of transportation—feet, bicycles, scooters, private cars, and public transit—mediate the movement of both children and their guardians (Figure 4). Children are carried to school in one set of tools, while the parents themselves are transported onward, linking domestic care with the rhythms of urban mobility.

These moments show how carrying extends beyond simply holding or moving objects—it also involves transporting people, negotiating space, and coordinating daily rhythms. In Beijing's morning school rush, carrying is inseparable from mobility: parents' guide children along crowded streets, navigate bicycles and scooters through traffic, and coordinate their own onward journeys to work or errands. Each act of transport—whether a child on a bike seat, groceries in a tote, or a backpack swung over the shoulder—requires attentiveness to bodies, urban infrastructures, and temporal pressures. Carrying becomes a relational practice, embedded in the routines of everyday life, through which urban residents actively move, manage, and sustain both household and social life.

NOTES ON CARRYING

In 衣食住行 (*yī shí zhù xíng*), the four essential aspects of living in Chinese urban life: clothing, food, dwelling, and transportation, the practices of carrying are deeply entangled. From laundry baskets to shopping trolleys, strollers to scooters, carrying weaves through the socio-spatial practices that sustain life in urban China. My ethnographic observations, gathered through daily encounters and slow attention to ordinary gestures, show that carrying is not simply about moving objects from one place to another. It is about sustaining bodies, maintaining households, and reshaping the social and spatial fabric of the city.

衣 (clothing). In gated communities, clotheslines stretched between trees, lampposts, or fences make visible the labour of domestic maintenance. Carrying damp garments down stairwells and into semi-public courtyards produces temporary landscapes of laundry, extending the private interior into shared spaces. These acts reorder the use of communities, transforming them into extensions of the home while revealing the often-invisible labour of care. Laundry, in this sense, is not only functional but also spatial, shaping the everyday environment of the community.

食 (food). At the morning farmers' market, elderly adults with shopping bags and wheeled trolleys enact another dimension of carrying: the bodily work of pulling, lifting, and redistributing food from vendor tables to household kitchens. These repeated movements connect domestic kitchens with broader circuits of urban supply, linking intimate family meals with the logistical infrastructures that bring produce from rural fields to urban tables. The rhythms of carrying here are inseparable from the rhythms of feeding, both material and social.

住 (dwelling). In the semi-public spaces of urban dwellings in China, personal and domestic items blur the boundary between private and collective space. Dwelling is not limited to the apartment itself; it is enacted through what is carried, placed, and stored. These traces of everyday life make visible the rhythms of care, maintenance, and seasonal preparation, showing how domestic practices extend into shared spaces and actively shape the material and social atmosphere of urban residential life.

行 (transportation). Carrying in the context of mobility extends beyond objects to people. Morning school commutes—children on e-scooters or bicycles, schoolbags and essentials in tow—illustrate the relational and temporal coordination involved in moving bodies through urban space. Carrying here mediates between domestic care and urban infrastructure, linking household responsibilities to the city's transportation systems. These routines reveal how mobility, care, and material transport are inseparable practices that structure daily life and produce relational urban space.

Across these scenes, carrying emerges as a practice that crosses thresholds—between private and public, household and neighbourhood, domestic and urban. It makes visible the embodied labour that sustains everyday life, much of which is feminised or otherwise overlooked in official narratives of urban development. To pay attention to carrying is to notice how ordinary gestures hold together the constantly make/unmake/remake urban spaces: how bodies, bags, strollers, scooters, and ropes stretch across space to keep lives connected and in motion.

Carrying, then, is never a neutral act of moving something or someone from one place to another; it is a spatial practice that threads and reconfigures the relation between bodies, spaces, and the urban. At the micro scale, it is expressed in the weight of a schoolbag on a parent's back, the careful balance of groceries in a trolley, or the repetitive movement of laundry pegged to a rope. These bodily gestures appear ordinary but are essential to sustaining life, and they continually reshape the use of space: stairwells that become laundry routes, parking lots that turn into playgrounds, sidewalks that double as scooter parking zones.

At the scale of the household, carrying mediates the circulation of resources—food, water, clothing, childcare—between the inside and outside. The home cannot be sustained without these flows, yet these flows also mean that domestic life spills into semi-public courtyards, neighbourhood markets, and transport nodes. Carrying thus unsettles the conventional boundary of the private home, showing that “dwelling” is not contained within four walls but woven through movements that extend across shared spaces.

At the neighbourhood level, these acts of carrying stitch together social relations. The repetitive encounters at morning markets or daily conversations in the stairwells, where neighbours exchange greetings, swap advice, or simply coexist in proximity. Carrying objects—groceries, children, laundry—becomes entangled with carrying relationships, a form of social maintenance that sustains community life.

At the macro scale of the city, carrying ties everyday labour to the larger systems of urban infrastructure and governance. Parents who deliver their children to school on e-scooters and then continue their commute connect household responsibilities to the transit system. Elderly residents pulling vegetables home from informal markets rely on, yet also extend beyond, the formal distribution networks of the city. These practices illustrate what Chinese scholars have described as *Sheng Huo Jian She* (生活建设, a planning approach that recognises daily living as a core dimension of urban development. In recent years, this has been institutionalised through initiatives such as the “15-minute community life circle” (15分钟社区生活圈), which aims to provide residents with access to essential services for daily life within a short walking distance (Cheng, 2021; Huiming et al., 2021). Parallel discourses on the “life-oriented city” (生活导向城市) (黄晴, 2025) and the “livable city” (宜居城市) (Zhang, 2016) further illustrate how urban planning in China has increasingly turned toward everyday practices as the measure of spatial justice and quality of life.

Carrying, as a specific feminist spatial practice, is what holds urban life together. It reveals how gendered bodies navigate, negotiate, and remake their environments through detailed, repetitive, and relational acts that sustain both domestic and public life. Carrying reconfigures the very spaces it moves through—stretching across thresholds between home and street, informal and formal economies, intimate care and large-scale infrastructure. To pay attention to carrying in urban China is therefore to recognise an alternative mode of spatial production: one not oriented toward spectacle or growth, but grounded in the everyday maintenance of life itself.

CONCLUDING MARKS

This article has traced everyday practices of carrying in a residential neighbourhood in Beijing to reflect on how urban life is sustained, negotiated, and reshaped through ordinary, embodied actions. Rather than approaching urban space as a fixed container or a product of formal planning alone, the study has shown how small, repetitive acts—hanging laundry, pulling shopping trolleys, storing household items in shared spaces, escorting children through dense morning traffic—incrementally configure the spatial and social life of the city.

Across the four domains of 衣食住行 (clothing, food, dwelling, and transport), the ethnographic material reveals carrying as a relational practice that links bodies, objects, infrastructures, and rhythms of daily life. These practices are not spectacular or overtly political, yet their cumulative effects are spatially consequential. They extend domestic labour beyond the private interior, activate semi-public spaces such as stairwells, courtyards, and markets, and connect household care with broader urban systems of supply, mobility, and governance. In this sense, carrying operates as a quiet but persistent mode through which urban space is lived, maintained, and subtly transformed.

One of the key insights emerging from this study is that carrying foregrounds forms of labour that are often rendered ordinary, feminised, or invisible within dominant narratives of urban development. Attending to these practices shifts analytical focus away from large-scale interventions toward the embodied work that sustains everyday life. It also complicates conventional distinctions between private and public, formal and informal, showing how urban dwelling is produced through continual negotiation at their boundaries. The spatiality of urban life, as observed here, is not only planned or regulated but repeatedly enacted through care, maintenance, and adaptation.

At the same time, this research opens up further questions. While the analysis has focused on the material and spatial dimensions of carrying, the metaphorical and affective aspects of carrying—highlighted in feminist theory as central to how bodies bear memories, responsibilities, and social relations—remain only partially explored here. How feelings of burden, attachment, obligation, or reassurance are carried alongside objects and people, and how these affective dimensions shape spatial experience, would require deeper and longer-term engagement with participants' narratives and embodied memories. Future research could extend this work through longitudinal ethnography, participatory methods, or comparative studies across different cities and social groups to examine how meanings of carrying shift across life stages, household arrangements, and urban contexts.

By foregrounding carrying as an everyday spatial practice, this article suggests an alternative way of understanding urban space in contemporary China—one grounded not in spectacle or growth, but in the ongoing work of sustaining life. Paying attention to these modest practices makes visible how urban environments are continuously made and remade through embodied labour, and how feminist perspectives can contribute to a more situated and relational understanding of urban life.

Acknowledgement

This article forms part of the author's doctoral research at the University of Manchester. The author would like to express her sincere gratitude to her supervisory team—Deljana Iossifova (Professor of Architecture and Urban Studies at the University of Manchester), Sarah Marie Hall (Professor in Human Geography at the University of Manchester), and Alison Leigh Browne (Professor in Human Geography at the University of Manchester)—for their generous guidance, thoughtful feedback, and continuous encouragement throughout the development of this research. The author is also deeply grateful to the residents and participants in Beijing who kindly shared their time, experiences, and everyday stories during the ethnographic fieldwork, without whom this research would not have been possible.

Funding

This research was supported by the School of Environment, Education and Development (SEED) Doctoral Studentship 2023 at the University of Manchester.

Ethical statement

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the University of Manchester. Ethical approval for the ethnographic fieldwork was granted by the Environment, Education & Development PGR School Panel at the University of Manchester (Ref: 2025-22074-40863) prior to the commencement of fieldwork.

Competing interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests.

Author contributions

XL is the sole author of this article and was responsible for the conceptualization, research design, ethnographic fieldwork, data collection, analysis, and writing of the manuscript.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study consist primarily of ethnographic fieldnotes, sketches, and observational documentations generated by the author during fieldwork in Beijing, China. Selected images of fieldnotes are included in the article. Due to the sensitive and contextual nature of ethnographic data and to protect participant privacy, the full dataset is not publicly available.

AI disclosure

The author confirms that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the development of the research content, analysis, or findings of this manuscript.

Biographical sketch

Xin Li is a PhD candidate in Architecture in the Department of Architecture at the University of Manchester, United Kingdom. She holds a Master's degree in Architecture from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA. Her research explores the concept of carrying within urban infrastructures, re-envisioning infrastructures as spaces of everyday movement, care, and maintenance. Drawing on feminist spatial theory, she develops a "carrier bag approach" to examine the embodied and often overlooked relations between bodies, infrastructures, and urban life. Her research interests include feminist spatial practice, everyday urbanism, and urban infrastructures in contemporary China.

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Research paper

A Queer Autoethnography through Epiphanies in/of/from Ruin

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

Citation: Sarışen, U., & Şentürer, A. (2026). A queer autoethnography through epiphanies in/of/from ruin. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(2), Article 29. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/19077>

Published: August 27, 2026

ABSTRACT

This article asks how the lived memory of a queer body can reshape what we know about ruins and spatial justice. The article stages theory through embodied scenes, to trace how exclusion and small acts of refusal unfold in everyday spatial practices. I argue that spatial justice emerges in cracks and gestures, and that personal disorientation can be a source of knowledge. Here, I queer autoethnography with a methodology I call ruinous autoethnography; writing that emerges from ruin as its ontological condition. I develop this by using mnemohistory and autotheory to stitch life and theory, and by treating images and their absences as sites of inquiry (engaged ekphrasis v.2). Together, these moves offer a toolkit for reading spatial justice through the memory of queer bodies and ruins. Drawing on theory-stitched life-texts and epiphanies from Fikirtepe (Istanbul/Turkiye) and Volissos (Chios/Greece), I show how memory, space and body meet in moments of epiphany and make space thinkable anew. From these encounters I propose three spatio-temporal concepts -outlined conceptually, but left implicit in the epiphanies-: mnemonic space (a swinging door within the present that opens to what has been), epimnemonic projection (collisions where once-was spaces re-form the happening), and epiphenomenal space (a queer in-between that is temporally entangled).

Keywords: epiphany, queer memory, ruin, ruinous autoethnography, spatial justice

Dear reader,

This article takes the ruin as a way of writing.

This text is no straight line; it breaks and slips.

Like a ruin, the inside leaks out and the outside dissolves into it; boundaries blur as fragments surface and voices clash and fold. Take these as thresholds to other ways of making sense, while the images you meet are already re-made in your mind, colliding with what you read.

As you read, notice not only what is said but the way the article insists on saying it.

My "I" speaks as an epistemic subject.

You may get lost here.

In that disorientation, the role given to you as reader, to grasp correctly, to find one truth, breaks apart. You slip off the line. You queer yourself with the text.

When you misunderstand, when you think you fail, it is your own echoes that merges with these lines. And maybe, through an epiphany, your own epiphenomenal spaces crack open.

And at that point the article is no longer mine alone.

I began; you, reading, rewrite it.

In what spaces, in what times, did you meet injustice? How did you resist? What did you take, what did you give?

Together we assemble a shared archive. Knowledge made from where we stand. We ruin this article, ruin-ing it with our stories soaked in spatial injustices.

I WRITE FROM A DISPLACEMENT

As someone forced to migrate from Fikirtepe¹, my memories of that neighborhood remain like a closed box; always waiting, never gone. In abandoned places, in ruins, the box opens and traumas rise like dust, sudden and sharp. I have epiphanies.

In the summer of 2024, walking through the streets of Volissos², these boxes opened again [Figure 1]. The ruins pressed on me and I wrote the epiphanies in my sketchbook as they came.

It was there I sensed the entanglement of my queer memory, the ruin and justice. My queer academic identity made that sense legible, from which this article emerged.

How can the lived memory of a queer body reconfigure our understanding of ruins and spatial justice?

How can the fractures of ruins, both material and mnemonic, reshape the ways we imagine queer lives and spatial justice?

How can struggles for spatial justice open through the cracks of queer memory and ruination, unsettling normative orders of spatio-temporalities?

What forms of academic writing and methodology might engage queer experience at the intersections of ruin and justice?

The article carries questions together; but fragment by fragment, in a dramaturgy where body, space, memory and ruin echo and interrupt one another.

To hold these entanglements, I write through ruinous autoethnography³, which I offer as a new methodological approach.

¹ Fikirtepe is a district in Istanbul that grew as a squatter house settlement through rural migration in the mid-20th century. Later it became the site of Türkiye's largest urban transformation project, where an entire neighborhood was demolished and replaced by high-rise residential blocks.

² Volissos is one of the villages on the Greek island of Chios, known for its medieval castle and surrounding ruins. Today it carries traces of abandonment and seasonal life.

³ Ruinous autoethnography is a methodological mode that moves between embodied autoethnographic knowledge, temporal and orientational queer drift, and the fractured ontology of ruins. It is politically attuned to questions of justice; and operationally enacted through the fissures of memory, entanglement of theory and self, and the epistemics of visual/non-visual imagery. This is a writing practice that takes its ontological ground from ruins themselves. A ruinous mode here lets fragments remain fractured. It accepts gaps, interruptions, and unfinished edges as part of knowledge.

It emerges by bringing together three genealogies that are related yet porous:

The first is the ground established by feminist and performative autoethnography, where embodied, situated, and fragmented subjectivity becomes an epistemic source. It takes shape through works that approach the body and performance as sites of knowledge (Spry, 2001; Denzin, 2013); that treat lived experience as theoretical practice (Holman Jones et al., 2013, 2015); that understand multiplicity, contradiction, and fracture as epistemic conditions (Gannon, 2013; Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013); and that focuses on the situated nature of all knowing (Haraway, 1988).

This ground is then bent by queer theory into a second lineage; through understandings of disorientation and strangeness as epistemic openings (Ahmed, 2000, 2006), accounts of non-linear and interruptive queer temporalities that unsettle normative chronologies (Halberstam, 2005), articulations of queer epistemic drift and narrative instability that reconfigure how method itself unfolds (Holman Jones & Harris, 2019), and approaches to visual and phenomenal ambiguity as a site of queer knowledge-making (Engel, 2018). Reflections on spatial micro-resistance frame this queer becoming within a political horizon (Pile, 1997).

The third lineage emerges when this queer-inflected method encounters the ontological possessions of ruins; through accounts that frame ruination as a collapse of temporal order (Trigg, 2006, 2012; Parry, 2019); readings of ruination as a politically produced process (Stoler, 2013); approaches that position ruins as sites of ontological incompleteness and encounters with otherness (Gabriel, 1993; Lavery & Murray, 2019); that treat decay as an epistemic surface where erosion, absence, and material residue generate knowledge (Ginsberg, 2004; Somhegyi, 2018); and examinations of ruins as modernity's residual archive (Hell & Schönlé, 2010).

The political horizon that connects these genealogies is shaped by readings of justice as the redistribution of spatial inequalities (Harvey, 1996); as a struggle for recognition, representation, and participatory parity (Fraser, 1996, 2009; Young, 1990); as a spatial condition tied to the right to inhabit space (Soja, 2010); and as an ethics grounded in vulnerability, livability, and relational obligations toward others (Butler, 2004).

The genealogy becomes methodologically operative through mnemohistory, autotheory, and engaged ekphrasis. Mnemohistory takes shape through accounts of memory as a spatial and temporal palimpsest (Huyssen, 2003), cultural and collective memory as processes of re-assemblage (Assmann, 2011; McGill, 2011), and trauma as a recursive temporal rupture marked by uncanny returns (Caruth, 1996; Laub, 1992; Trigg, 2012).

Autotheory operates through feminist articulations of entanglement of theory and life (Fournier, 2021) with relational and performative modes (Brushwood Rose & Nelson, 2016; Lorentzen, 2015; Prickett, 2015). In this mode of writing, my voice and the theorists' voices do not appear as separate entities; their concepts enter the article as resonances within my own voice. References do not stand outside the argument but co-write it.

Figure 1

In volissos, i asked around about these ruins



in volissos, i asked around about these ruins. some said people left for the mainland for economic reasons. others said they perished, or fled, during the massacre of chios. when i turned to academic sources, i found no satisfying clarity. the ruins themselves remained a sealed box. perhaps one day, someone will open it.

As queer presence in scholarship opens new epistemologies, I believe it matters for academia.

By taking personal disorientation seriously, and folding it into theoretical reflection, my article tries to show how lived experience is already conceptual work; which makes it occur as an academic work naturally.

I believe in the necessity of writing a queer article in a form that is fragmented, broken, and open to disorder. For me this is an ontological demand of queerness itself.

At the same time, I have to admit that I have often worried that the knowledge produced here, and what I find valuable to share with academia, might fall into the background if clarity and readability are abandoned altogether.

During the writing process I struggled with myself; between staying faithful to queer ontology and making the article followable.

I see this struggle as part of the very presence of queer positions in academia; finding ways to exist within a normative system of academic production.

I also believe that these struggles will open the ground for future academic works to be even more daring, to let the ontological demand of queer writing unfold more fully.

In the end, I chose to respond to the ontological demand as much as possible, while also keeping a fragile overall structure that the reader can still navigate.

The overall structure I speak of is porous.

Each layer leaks into the others and holds an intentionally unstable whole. A reader may well ask why a certain narrative sits under one layer rather than another or may reimagine their own flows across them.

In *Ruins of Thought*, I explore the ontological ground.

This part has three layers; *Crack, Threshold, Ash*.

Engaged ekphrasis expands the methodological field by treating visual and non-visual imagery as epistemic events (Engel, 2018).

In *Crack*, I show how a queer is tied to the stranger inside and how dis-orientation becomes an ontological beginning.

In *Threshold*, I bring epiphany to the center as the crack of queer memory. From there I develop three concepts that carry the article forward: *mnemonic space* (the swinging door inside becoming), *epimnemonic projection* (the collision of spaces of what has been with the happening), and *epiphenomenal space* (a queer in-between that is neither only now nor only residue).

Epiphanies let the reader sense them; sometimes as mnemonic spaces with their epimnemonic projections, sometimes as epiphenomenal archives where collisions open queer spatialities.

In *Ash*, I link epiphany to trauma and lay down the ethical and epistemic ground of the work.

In *Writing the Ruin/Ruinously/as Ruin Itself*, I turn to methodology.

In *Autoethnography*, I explain why I write from myself and why this is an epistemological stance.

In *Queering Autoethnography*, I show how my queer position bends the methodology and makes its political force clear.

In *Ruinous Autoethnography*, I reveal the operational structure of the methodology through three axes: *mnemohistory*, *autotheory* and *engaged ekphrasis v.2*.

In *A Dramaturgy of Epiphanies in/of/from Ruin*, I stage theory, method, life-texts and epiphanies together through embodied scenes. Spatial justice, queerness, and ruination leak into one another here.

I oriented shows how justice emerges through micro-gestures of the body. *I collided* and *I ruptured* tell of clashes with normative spatio-temporality, the making of the stranger, and the slip from the line. *I resisted* turns to tactics of unintelligibility, small refusals, and spatial micropolitics. *I migrated* expands these experiences across personal, familial, and urban scales, interwoven with the large transformation of Fikirtepe.

RUINS OF THOUGHT

Crack

I am an other.

The self exists entangled with the stranger inside. The other is inseparable, irreducible. In its excess, queer comes into being.

Queerness, then, arrives from the fracture already within.

Queer names what does not belong to the line. To slip from the line is also to open new orientations and extensions, like the body widening its reach by touching what feels strange to itself (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 115, 135, 161). Queer becomes an orientation born of alterity.

The ruin is where my body, my sense of time, and myself knot together. It pulls me toward movement, toward weight; its presence calls for a response. A folded fragment, the ruin is tucked into my identity.

This folding is never stable; the self holds its cracks as openings, passages where time and space begin to bend toward queer orientations.

When the other settles into these cracks, they open toward queer spatio-temporality. Queer reorganizes it; space through the subject's ways of making place, time through temporalities that refuse normative reproductive patterns (Halberstam, 2005, pp. 6, 167). This queer attunement of time remakes space.

Queer interrupts linear progression, bending the line to carve out room for itself. And in that bend, memory starts to lean, resisting the smooth path of chronology and settling instead into thresholds of tension.

I am queer; my identity, my spatio-temporality, queer. Linear time does not hold me.

My memory rests in the stubborn tension between what has been and what is becoming. I stand on the fragile seam, on a plane that will not reconcile (Huyssen, 2003, p. 10; Trigg, 2006).

The seam is a silent ruin where narratives collide; where the marginal rewrites the dominant, where accounts overlap (Gabriel, 1993, p. 218). A space holding identities, memories and experiences; a place setting a journey toward memory in motion.

What collides in the ruin also collides in me. Memory, unable to hold its line, scattering into knots of time and space.

I am queer. When I remember, the familiar folds into the strange, my experience splinters (Trigg, 2006, 2012, pp. 189, 215). What I recall belongs to what is becoming; what has been re-made in the now through memory's work (Megill, 2011, p. 196; Assmann, 2011, p. 210).

In my memory, then, what has been and what is becoming collapse into each other, a co-being that generates itself.

Threshold

There are moments of memory that strike suddenly. At the most unlikely times, a place delivers its slap; the body slides into another time, another space. This is *epiphany*.

The strike leaves a crack, and through it another surface begins to show.

I am in the space of what is becoming. When it turns into a surface that wraps my body and memory, epiphany is born, carrying me into the spaces of what has been. The space shifts into a place of reminding. A door within what is becoming. I call it a *mnemonic space*.

The door keeps swinging, sometimes brushing skin, sometimes scraping wall.

At times epiphany flares in a bodily fold, at times in the space itself. The relation my body weaves with space overlays folds, orientations, surfaces, textures of familiarity... Epiphany is this sudden binding of layers; a radiance that cuts the line of time and carries me wholly elsewhere.

What binds also slips apart; light leaking through the gap names what is missing.

Epiphany takes shape through absence; the space once embodied in what has been no longer here. The absence holds a transformative potential, creating new presence. It diffuses into the spaces of what is becoming (Trigg, 2012, p. 17) and is re-assembled through memory and body.

But the gap offers only shadows in place of return.

I cannot remember the spaces of what has been, the ones epiphany emerges, in their real presence. They are not here in what is becoming; I left them long ago, they are over, done. Only through a photograph or another record can I glimpse that frozen reality: *the space of once-was*.

Still my body leans in, like a bridge that holds only while trembling.

My body becomes an interface that crosses the physical absence of the space of once-was. As memory takes form within the materiality of what is becoming, the traces of what has been blur the boundary between my body and space, binding temporal slices together (Trigg, 2006, p. 59). Spatial traces of becoming thus merge in my memory with traces of what has been (Huyssen, 2003, p. 7).

The tremor unsettles the line; nothing keeps pace.

Epiphany disrupts the continuity of the familiar. Struggling to grasp the experience, I am drawn into a liminal state of rupture. In this moment, time slips from linearity and experience thickens into layers (Denzin, 2013, pp. 132, 135). The relation between me, space, and time is re-attuned; I move from one space into another.

From this limp, folds gather; walls bend into one another, past and present pressing close.

Epiphany carries me into a space of what has been, re-made in what is becoming through memory's form. This space dissolves through the epiphanic fissure opened by the mnemonic. Flowing into becoming, colliding with it. I call this collision an *epimnemonic projection*. Spaces collapse onto one another; details, affects, times, traumas, the orientations of my body... all tangle together.

From the press, something leaks sideways; no longer wall, not yet air, a drift without anchor, unhomed.

The shadow of what has been and the texture of what is becoming merges into reality. From this collision a trans-temporal spatiality is born, what I name the *epiphenomenal space*. Neither the freshness of the mnemonic nor the residual presence of the once-was. A slurry, strange, foreign. Queer.

Ash

Epiphanies may trigger trauma (Adams et al., 2015, p. 27), suddenly surfacing the sediments of pain etched into the mind.

What rises does not disappear at once; it hangs in the air, fine, unsettled, waiting for the next breath to stir it.

I am queer. I carry traumas; inscribed in the folds of my identity, in the spatio-temporalities my body bears. They linger at the threshold of remembering and forgetting (Huyssen, 2003, p. 8); breaking into my temporal experience, making me lose time (Caruth, 1996, p. 61; Laub, 1992, p. 69).

A delayed, uncontrollable return that repeats when it finds its chance (Caruth, 1996, p. 11). It waits for the blurred intervals of epiphany, and when a mnemonic space jolts memory, it leaps out.

Like a ghost.

A ghost that settles into space. Wearing the pain of what has been like a cloak, projecting itself onto what is becoming. And it reminds me, that despite everything, I have survived. My struggle to claim that survival (Caruth, 1996, p. 64).

Some of it clings, laying a thin layer across surfaces, faint but persistent, marking what it touches without weight.

Epiphany is not mine alone; it is a shared scene, a rupture. The gap opened by my writing becomes a space where other voices can seep in. My words fall into the fabric of culture, the cracks of history, the silences of society. Not only my voice; here echo stories once suppressed, silenced, denied (Holman Jones et al., 2013, p. 22).

Drifting further, it does not choose where to land. Carried by currents, it slips into other mouths, other breaths, other throats.

I am queer. In reading my traumas, you are reading the traumas of others. This is a narrative where wounds intertwine (Caruth, 1996, p. 8). Mine, Fikritepe's, Volissos's...

WRITING THE RUIN/RUINOUSLY/AS RUIN ITSELF

Autoethnography

My article is queer. It places me at the center of research, making me carry its epistemological and ontological weight (Spry, 2001, p. 711). It opens room for my experience to speak and offers an epistemology from within (Adams et al., 2015, p. 31).

Here I am not fixed; I am performed and queered again and again. Fixed definitions imposed on me are unsettled, revealing a self that is fragmented (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 73).

It turns me into a site where connection loosens between self-reader-text (Gannon, 2013, pp. 229–232).

My article is autoethnographic.

In writing, I find myself mirrored in ruins; never whole, always layered with what has cracked and what persists.

To live among ruins is to accept that we inhabit different forms of subjectivity. From here grows a sensitivity to what is unseen, what is temporary and what has been (Gabriel, 1993, p. 215).

My article is queer, like my othered self. In autoethnographic performance, I am at once self and other (Spry, 2001, p. 716). I position myself as both observed and observing, both narrated and narrating. The knowledge of a body positioned as queer.

With the other internalized within the self, my identity turns into a bundle of impulses (Harvey, 1996, p. 63); clashing voices, conflicting drives, inherited others mixing together.

Who speaks as I narrate? Which side resists? Even I cannot always tell. This chaos pushes me to question the political and ideological ties between self and other and the relations of power that bind us. It makes visible how my reality is built (Spry, 2001, pp. 706–716).

Queering autoethnography

I am a queer academic. My work aims to join in the recoding of queer culture (Halberstam, 2005, p. 174). To write from this position is never neutral; my identity bends the method before the words even begin.

Autoethnography, carried through a queer body, cannot remain intact. What emerges is a method unsettled by its own excess.

Queer moments demand to be re-archived, etched into memory at those fragile intervals where objects slip and orientations shake (Ahmed, 2006, p. 171; Halberstam, 2005, p. 176). From here, queering autoethnography becomes both a methodological and political gesture; writing bodily disorientations, slippages and fragmentations into the text (Holman Jones & Harris, 2019, p. 7).

Such writing refuses to stabilize knowledge. Instead, it unsettles assumed forms, making space for experiences left outside culture to surface as valuable epistemologies (Holman Jones & Harris, 2019, p. 4; Love & Peltonen, 2017).

In this frame, to think like a ruin is to craft a philosophy of outsideness, one that unsettles the divides between self and other, inside and outside, nature and culture... The ruin makes these boundaries visible. It positions itself as an identity that gathers ontology, politics and ethics together (Lavery & Murray, 2019, p. 251).

I take this visibility further: to queer autoethnography through ruin is to let the method crack. Time falls in layers of sediment, theory and self scatter as shards, description hovers like dust. Nothing whole, everything leaning, as ruins do, ruinous.

Ruinous autoethnography

Sediments of ruinous temporality/mnemohistory

The ruin blurs the boundaries of time and space (Hell & Schönle, 2010, p. 8). It never fully settles into context, never fully breaks away; distant, yet close to the present (Trigg, 2006).

Its absences transform the gaze of me (Parry, 2019; Trigg, 2012, p. 17). With its disjointed fragments, it expands what has been, freeing it from being trapped in a singular, ordered narrative (Trigg, 2006).

My article is queer. Like my body; leaping, stumbling, sometimes colliding with a wall and veering off. My thoughts slip, escaping their own weight, seeping onto other surfaces. In writing I do not hide these slippages; I make room for them instead (Gannon, 2013, p. 233).

Each fracture leaves a trace, each fragment touches another context. Fragments speak at once; the silence of Volissos collides with the noise of Fikirtepe. Suddenly, what has been spills into the happening, body into space, ruin into queer.

Not toward what has been itself, but toward its remembered form I move; its echoes, its reflections within what is becoming (Assmann, 2011, pp. 209–210). *This is mnemohistory.*

To write with mnemohistory is to let time itself collapse in ruins; fragments of what has been leaning into what is becoming, each return a queer temporality re-constituted through its cracks.

Scattered, my article turns and turns again, re-assembling its fragments into a new order. To tell the traumatic is already to speak through fracture (Laub, 1992, p. 78).

Fragments of ruinous textuality/autotheory

The ruin stands between nature and the human-made, even staging its own resistance to nature (Ginsberg, 2004, p. 2). Yet it is incomplete; it confronts the subject with the birth of absence.

As it slowly collapses, the absence swells (Somhegyi, 2018, p. 16). In this way it forges a link between the materiality of my body and the temporality of myself (Trigg, 2012, p. 171).

My article is queer. I stitch it with autotheory; bringing together the personal and the conceptual, the theoretical and the autobiographical (Fournier, 2021, p. 19; Zacharias & Shleykina, 2021). A theory born from the self (Lorentzen, 2015, p. 45).

I move back and forth between self and theory, as if crossing a ruin where each step shifts the ground. I read it as performative life-writing (Brushwood Rose & Nelson, 2016).

Memory here works alongside theory as material; an in-between position that unsettles the line between recollection and writing (Prickett, 2015).

My life becomes a life-text; its fragments rest beside theory and the traces of other lives (Fournier, 2021, p. 177). Each shard unsettles the boundary of autobiography and concept.

Citations turn into intertextual intimacies (Fournier, 2021, pp. 161–176); cracks through which other voices dissolves into, binding my own life with the thoughts of others.

Dust of ruinous inscription / engaged ekphrasis v.2

The ruin appears as a stage where form is abandoned, existing only in its own materiality (Ginsberg, 2004, pp. 1–15). Knowledge of its surroundings is buried within the process of ruination; every trace of erosion leaves its record in the material (Parry, 2019, p. 1084). Clinging to its details, its texture, its color; the ruin halts us in its silent wholeness, even as it remains bound to its walls (Ginsberg, 2004, p. 9).

Like dust, these traces are never whole; they settle differently each time they are touched.

My article is queer; like my body seeping through absences, through spaces without image. Some images are present; photographs and visual records that I take up as sites of knowledge, read through detail, texture, and silence.

Others are absent. Mnemonic spaces and epiphenomenal scenes arrive without image, only through words. Here description insists; it compels the reader to imagine, to exceed the page, to conjure their own mental images and so to extend the article beyond its given limits.

Engaged ekphrasis here becomes a queer gesture. Description moves beyond depiction to act as a subject of knowledge and theoretical construction (Engel, 2018, pp. 2–3).

Yet in this version, v.2, engaged ekphrasis stretches to include what is unseen as well. The queerness of my article emerges in this fragile yet resistant relation to the visual; sometimes anchored in the dust of what is visible, sometimes drifting in the ghost of what cannot be seen.

I take the visual, or its absence, as a site for transforming entrenched power relations; its presence, or its ghost, lets me reconstruct space through its diagnostic and transformative force (Engel, 2018, pp. 1–2).

A DRAMATURGY OF EPIPHANIES IN/OF/FROM RUIN

I oriented

I understand justice as a multilayered process at work in the recognition and representation of identity and space.

It is tied to the recognition of the individual (Butler, 2004, pp. 3–4) and to the organization of spatial practices (Harvey, 1996, p. 330). Some subjects are rendered invisible in spatial practices, while representation decides who organizes space and how (Fraser, 1996, pp. 3–7; 2009, pp. 16–20). Justice, then, lives in these gaps; between what is visible and what is erased, between who gets to stand in space and who is left out.

The norm is what ties itself to the body and sets the rules for being seen.

Norms usually work quietly, fixing what counts as intelligible, deciding which gestures and lives are allowed to appear (Butler, 2004, pp. 41–42, 58). They are the lines bodies are asked to follow, and following them already bends justice toward what is allowed.

Orientation begins in the body's hereness, its wavering "where," the first skew with space (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 7–8). It is a leaning, a turning, deciding what pulls our energy, what claims attention (pp. 3, 6). Repeated, these turns sediment into dwelling, but never without slippage (pp. 9, 11).

Dwelling is the stretch of the body into space, forming folds where traces of the body and traces of space press onto each other (Ahmed, 2006, p. 11). Over time, space feels layered into the body; repetition builds familiarity, and familiarity shapes what the body can do (p. 7).

In this loop, justice is lived in the weight of posture, in textures that return, in the small ways space gives or denies capacity.

To be on the line allows bodies to extend into space; alignment means being in line with others. To step into a line is already to become oriented (p. 15).

I had drawn my own line somehow before it ever met the lines of the outside world. This existence was shaped through the folds of my body and the familiar layers of space.

At four years old, with the toy sofa set and dolls my father bought, I staged my first version of it in the glass-fronted cabinet. I placed the sofas in my own order, chose the toys, arranged scenes. The space was mine.

Sitting cross-legged in front of it, my being felt aligned in the line, through the fold of my posture, the angle of light, the texture of fabric, the placement of toys (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Wooden bunk bed, a small desk and chair below



wooden bunk bed, a small desk and chair below: beside it a dark cabinet, toys and lace lined up behind glass. stuffed animals arranged on top of the television, small figures tucked into shelves. faded flower patterns on the walls, artificial flowers in the corners. the bend of posture. come together: a small universe with its own order, its own scale, its own rule. a self-hidden yet present.

I stood inside a room whose roof had fallen in. Stone walls, plaster had peeled, corners unraveled. Above, a few beams clung half-broken, sky spilling through their gaps. Light hung in shafts, holding the dust mid-air; coolness coming from the walls, sliding down my back.

The gap above pulled my eyes upward, the narrow strip of sky drawing my body into its line. Dust followed the light, tugging me forward. I oriented.

The absence of the roof folded into the narrow strip of sky; Volissos's half-remnant room became the apartment void of childhood in Fikirtepe. A corridor appeared between two buildings, compressed and dark. From above drifted television voices, slamming doors, cooking smells.

There, we played house. Dividing the narrow space into rooms, we set rules from the sounds around us. Chalk lines on the ground, dust pressed into our knees. A house smuggled between buildings.

Stone wall. rubble gaps. plaster flaked. moss thick at the base. roof collapsed. beams skewed. cable shadows across a slit of sky. shafts of light. dust suspended. laundry-line shadows. clothespins midair. soil and concrete fused. weeds sprouting. broken stones at the threshold. wind's moan. metallic clang. television murmur. smell of cooking. heavy damp air.

In 1960 my grandfather left a forested mountain village in Anatolia for Istanbul, with my grandmother and their four children. He worked in a bakery, she cleaned houses (Figure 3).

Figure 3

The lines of my grandfather's face



the lines on my grandfather's face. the closing of his hands over the bread. the fingerprints on the dough. the missing walls of the house in fikirtepe, built with bare bricks and covered with nylon sheets. the dark void inside the oven. the draughty openings of that house without windows or doors. the warmth of the bread, the cold of the house. the rhythm of a life built with migration.

In Fikirtepe, they bought a plot, still registered as farmland.

With savings gathered bit by bit, they built a squatter house. A well in front, bare bricks, no windows or doors. The nylon sheets stretched across the openings, the wind seeping through.

Over time the children worked, floors were added, until by 1989 it was a four-story apartment, three years before I was born.

The surrounding squatter houses grew the same way. Layer by layer. Between plot lines and walls lay voids where cats slipped through and children hid.

Families from villages. Struggling, surviving, holding on. Solidarity lived in the street.

Mothers gathering in gardens, knitting, talking. Children outside all day, playing hide-and-seek, dodgeball, nine stones, hopscotch. Games stretching into screams and laughter, lasting deep into the night air.

I climbed the stone steps of Volissos. Edges fractured, my foot almost slipped. Beside me a wall leaned into rubble. Fig leaves cast their shadow; branches stirred, and the shadow stirred too.

A heavy, sweet scent spread, my body sinking into its coolness. My knees pressed into the stone's chill, and without thinking, my body aligned.

Habit meeting surface, familiarity folding me into Fikirtepe. We sat at doorsteps, half-open doors spilling food smells, fig branches bowing into the street. Perched on the garden wall, legs dangling, knees brushing.

Playing charades, our ears filled with the murmur of neighbors.

steps rounded. threshold fusing stone and iron. ivy tangled. stone patched with concrete. garden wall low. blurred boundary. whitewash blistered. rubble beneath. door jamb incomplete. fig trunk pressed to wall. branch wedged as buttress. ground sloping. weeds sprouting. sound chamber holding echoes.

The ruin is queer.

An other the body turns toward but cannot fully grasp. A surface unfamiliar yet calling, a void to lean into, an edge to cross, a trace beyond touch. Through its otherness the ruin shapes the queer body; an extension that transforms without closure. The body reaches to relate, but the ruin resists. Its silence carries a cool, insistent distance; a tension of almost-being, a refusal of full arrival.

I collided

Normative systems leak, they warp.

Suppression twists into strange political forms (Stoler, 2013, p. 7). The very production of truth already carries the weight of exclusion (Butler, 2004, pp. 41–42). Knowledge, then, is always from a body, always entangled (Haraway, 1988, p. 590). Justice follows the same ground; situated, spatial (Harvey, 1996, p. 330).

If truth is never neutral, then neither is space.

Space itself is stitched through with ideology, its surface uneven with inequalities (Soja, 2010, p. 19). Even spatio-temporality is imposed, pressed down through domination, yet always restless, always open to struggle (Harvey, 1996, p. 241).

White space decides who is seen, who counts (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 133–134). Time tightens around reproduction, looping bodies into the rhythms of bourgeois life (Halberstam, 2005, pp. 4–6). Empire stitches difference into its own skin (Stoler, 2013, pp. 24–25). Thus the ordering of space and time grounds difference and otherness. Spatial divisions regulate where bodies belong. Spatial difference underpins the very measures of justice.

And into this ordering, my body collided.

At home I had my own order, a safe, repeating play. I decided how things would be. But on the street the rules were already written. How a boy should play, speak, appear. My knowledge did not count there.

My thin voice, my fragility, the push to “be a man”. My body fell outside a map already drawn. From the safety of home I entered spaces I could not claim (**Figure 4**).

Figure 4

Decoration for my circumstances celebration



decoration for my circumcision celebration. ribbons glittering on the ceiling. gifts arriving one after another. cars, racetracks, toy guns. presenting meant for a boy, for the boy i was told i had become. my face already refused them. the outside world had entered our home, delivering its masculine script onto my body. yet in this white and queer circumcision dress, with its sash and shine, i found a fragile relief. as if the garment could shield me. for a moment.

This corner was not mine; that game was closed to me. On the street, time and space belonged to others.

Home opened a field of being; the street was exclusion. I grew up caught between my own situatedness and what the street demanded.

Childhood taught me early that space and time are maps of power. And outside those maps, my difference was exposed. Why was I not like them? (**Figure 5**).

Fikirtepe's boundaries were organic, its life porous. Carpets washed in the street, children picnicking by the roadside, toys sold by them on makeshift stalls. From outside it looked like disorder; from within, it was the neighborhood's lifeblood (**Figure 6**).

Unaligned with the normative frame, it was judged unsafe, uncanny, a stray glimmer, and for that very reason, a target.

I slipped between two stone walls, my shoulders colliding with the rough surfaces. A stair trace left unfinished, my foot slid on the sloping ground. Above, the sky narrowed into a single strip.

From the base of the walls rose the smell of moss; the air inside was heavy, damp. Silence compressed, even my breath echoed. My body collided with the narrowness, folding into its squeeze.

In that collision, Fikirtepe surfaced. Hidden passages appeared between buildings; tight corridors only children knew. Places where I held my breath in games, pressed myself against the walls to escape bullies.

There too the sky showed only as a strip, sounds leaked from above, but no gaze could reach me.

stone and concrete joined. muffled sounds. plaster hollowed. stair trace half-formed. gutter fragment. scrape of metal. rusted downpipe. broken tile. opening narrow. threshold stuffed with stone. lintel cracked. passage compressed. friction polished. sky a thin strip above. damp air heavy. children's laughter. echoes colliding. recess at shoulder height. just enough for a body to slip.

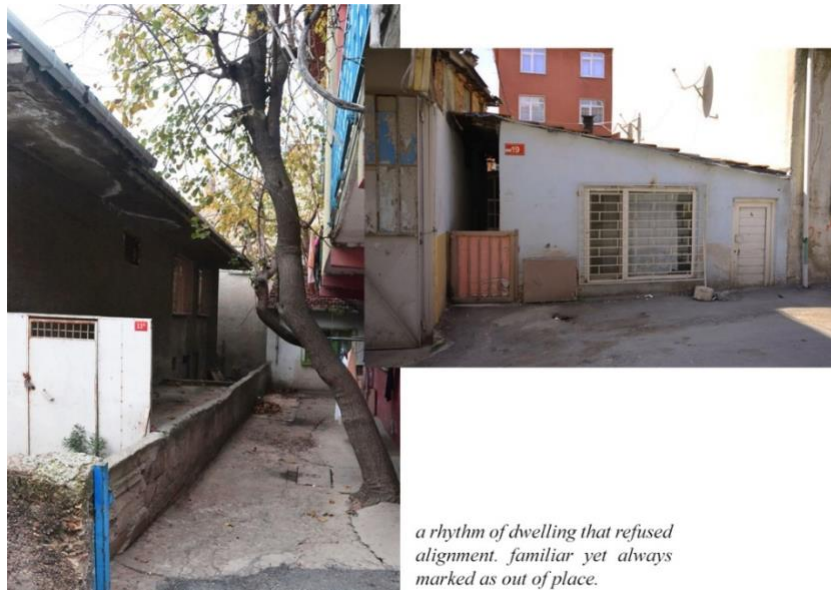
Figure 5

The swing moved with their joy, but not mine



Figure 6

A rhythm of dwelling that refused alignment



I ruptured

Normative systems make life livable or not through conditions of recognition. The subject is intelligible only within these bounds.

Recognition affirms yet also constrains, even undoes the subject (Butler, 2004). Subjects at the threshold are lives sacrificed at the edge of recognizability (Halberstam, 2005, p. 162).

Outside norms, existence is actively othered; made invisible, excluded, stripped of authority, and left vulnerable to marginalization, disrespect, and violence (Young, 1990; Fraser, 1996).

The stranger's body is built through incorporation and expulsion, redrawing inside-outside boundaries (Ahmed, 2000, pp. 54–74). It becomes an object of knowledge, recognized only through the observer's authority. The stranger's own ways of knowing are erased, even as the body marks the limit the normative cannot cross; the edge of what counts as home.

As a child I was a stranger. In the normative world of childhood, I appeared as excess, as deviation. I was not understood, treated as something to be solved; knowledge of me came not from my own voice but from the images others made.

I was pushed to the edges of play spaces, to unseen corners, to gaps between garden walls, sometimes to the stairwells of apartment entrances. Kept outside the “we,” I became the figure targeted by rules. Nicknames, being mimicked, mockery... Bullies marked my body and identity as other.

Now I see. To be cast as a stranger is shaped both by difference itself and by how that difference is told. And when the telling is not yours, strangeness hardens into otherness.

In Volissos, at the center of the ruin, a wall stood alone. Rising at the corner of a near-square plan, abandoned without roof or neighboring walls. Its surface washed in blue; bright under sun, grey in shade.

The wall was both trace and erasure. Paint unable to hold, memory scored into time only to flake away. Drawn into its blue, my body tilted, pulled toward what was no longer. Ruptured, I slipped across.

The streets of Fikirtepe appeared. Hopscotch etched on asphalt, squares side by side and diagonal, a diagram for play. Our knees dusted in grit, chalk in our hands, lines sharp, white. Until rain arrived: marks swelling, darkening, then flowing away.

Within minutes the squares blurred, the field of play erased.

three meters tall. corners crumbled. shadow slipping. blue wash peeling to expose coarse stone. hollow niche. cobweb thick. hopscotch line faint. ground scattered with plaster and dust. seam with sky wavering. blue flaring. dissolving into flakes. chalk merging with blue. rain stain darkens.

When my grandfather migrated from Anatolia, Fikirtepe lay at once at the city's edge and in its heart, neither fully inside nor out. Migrants formed networks here, first visible only as labor, recognized by the city not as as workforce.

Over time the neighborhood itself was treated as a foreign body, a boundary endlessly redrawn. In reports it was marked as problem, to be solved or erased, though lives were built here, children raised, memories sedimented.

Recognition was always conditional. Crisis, earthquakes, or real-estate pressure could cast it out again.

Next to the center yet never counted as part of it. A workers' district in the 1980s, an investor's dream in the 2000s.

For the city's normative fantasy, Fikirtepe was kept as other, accepted but never equal, its labor taken, its future mortgaged.

What is not-ruin, once it ceases to serve the normative order, is abandoned to ruination, made architecture's other, punished in its present and left to disappear.

Ruins expose assumptions of agency, community, and progress (Hell & Schönle, 2010, p. 6). Ruination is a political project that corrodes people, relations, and things (Stoler, 2013, pp. 11–13). Its traces on material and social micro-ecologies are uneven. Some sites ignored or remade, some dismissed as waste, others hardened into permanence.

The ruin is queer.

In ruination it remembers who is ruined, bearing the weight of exclusion, refusing to forget. Its silence is evidence; it carries injustice. It is a layered archive, memory inscribed in matter.

I resisted

It is not enough to trace the ties between knowledge and power that fix the limits of intelligibility; one must follow where they split, where discontinuities tear the surface (Butler, 2004, p. 216). Justice begins there, in seeing how difference itself is produced, so that solidarities might cross spaces and stitch what power has torn (Harvey, 1996, pp. 6–360). These fractures flare into struggles for spatial justice, even as institutions hurry to plaster them over (Soja, 2010, p. 20).

Justice, then, is born from the cracks of systems. As ruins lose wholeness and open new meanings, so too do queer and spatial justice sprout from fissures.

If recognition within norms can undo the subject (Butler, 2004, pp. 3–4), then refusal may become a tactic to inhabit unintelligibility as survival. In unreadability, the subject unsettles the norm and generates a justice of its own.

The body can exceed norms and transform realities (Butler, 2004, p. 217). The stranger's body destabilizes the spatial-temporal embeddedness of the normative "clean" body (Ahmed, 2000, p. 52), marking its limits and producing tension. In this tension, strangeness becomes a force to disrupt normative spatio-temporality.

As a child I was strange. I discovered the freedom of strangeness early, which let me build a persona to shelter behind. I left traces where I was not allowed to reach, kept playing in the streets, refused erasure.

Hidden corners, narrow corridors, boundary walls, coal sheds... Sites I occupied through a strategy of touch. In spaces others called unsafe or useless I made games; discarded bricks, wood, and broken doors became part of play. Apartment gardens were my stage. Songs under laundry lines, sudden vanishings behind them. I was visible, but always at the edge (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Once read as neglected



My laughter breaking through silence, leaving mid-game, being the mother in house-play; these were small deviations, fractures in the boy-norm. With my hand gestures, looks, clothes, I refused to conform, and I did not retreat. Resistance grew from here.

Resistance is a way of diagnosing power and living through or around it (Pile, 1997, pp. 3–17). Space, too, was part of this negotiation; a shifting ground where boundaries were always redrawn. Power itself is fluid, incomplete, ambiguous (Pile, 1997, p. 14). So, resistance could not be fixed either, found instead in folds, quiet refusals, delays. My resistance was about living in contradictions of spaces, re-positioning myself again and again within them.

I remember the entrance to our apartment. To the left an iron door, ahead a narrow corridor, stairs rising on the left, and on the right a passage leading back. That passage opened to two flats, then a dim coal cellar and a storage room. Wedged against the plot line, the corridor was dark, with rats and cockroaches roaming, the shadows of walnut and vine trees falling across it.

Climbing the stairs brought you to the second-floor corridor. Opposite stood another iron door, behind it yet more stairs to the upper floors.

In the side corridor near this door, I played with the girls; my mother watching from inside. Above, the stairwell was open, the gap with the neighboring building forming a shapeless courtyard.

On the upper balconies hung laundry, in summer carpets, with families eating outside. At the back façade things grew stranger. The first two floors built in brick, the upper two in reinforced concrete, so the columns did not rest on the walls below but stood a meter forward. From the rear corridor they seemed to lift off the ground, rising into the air (Figure 8).

Figure 8

A building that refused the grammar of norms



a building that refused the grammar of norms. sounds familiar to me.

In Volissos I stood before a collapsed house. Massive blocks piled high, seared red by sun, radiating dry heat. I climbed their edges; stone shifted beneath me, my body lurched. Suspended, I resisted; legs straining, arms reaching for balance. From within diffused a draft of cool air, yet the weight above pressed heavy, threatening to fall.

There I was in Fikirtepe. We climbed onto the flat roofs of the coal sheds behind the gardens; feet slipping on rusted sheet metal. Coal dust smeared across my pants, the surface hard yet about to give way. From above there was pride in the view, and at the same time the unease of falling; an exhilaration laced with fear.

blocks scorched red. fractured edges. gaps in shadow. stone moaning. mass stacked. order uncertain. rusted sheet metal slanted. coal dust smeared. balance suspended. cool draft rising. hot vapor pressed. ground uneven. cracked junctions. solid and hollow at once. sheet ringing metallic.

The ruin is queer.

Its refusal to vanish opens ruptures that reshape what space can become. Fragmented, incomplete, insistent; it dwells by deviation, holding on through refusal of alignment.

I am ruin.

As I diminish, I layer, as I fragment, I multiply. My voids show me what lies beyond loss. My stones missing, my walls broken; I exist through absences. Each absence opens another door in memory; each missing multiplies me. Every crack point to a new story. Lost spaces line up in my body, neither fully present nor entirely gone.

The ruin is queer.

A fragile state, a threshold where everything keeps unraveling. The insistence of what is breaking, oscillating between inside and outside, between visibility and erasure.

I am ruin.

Too distant to grasp what I am, yet close enough to reflect what I have lived. I merge with what has collapsed onto me and where I have collapsed. Stone seeps into my muscles, memory into my veins.

Where I collapse you step on me; when I collapse onto you, I am born from you.

Disappearing, I become visible.

The ruin is queer.

It speaks with delay, with scatter, with rupture. With no fixed beginning or end, it holds remnants in a simultaneous existence, unfinished, rewritten, sometimes excessive, sometimes lacking. Blurred.

I migrated

Migration is a pulling of the body from settled orientations into undefined zones, producing at times failed alignments (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 9–12, 160). A reach toward a home lost or never fully possessed. A migrant orientation.

It, then, is a suspended process of reorientation after temporal and spatial dislocation (Ahmed, 2000, pp. 90–91).

Perhaps this was my first migration: from home to street, my place the same but my orientations displaced. Suspended between safety and rule, I lived where the line broke, carrying in my body the weight of not-belonging.

The ruin is queer.

Like the queer body, it draws strength from its dislocation. It carries something that resists assimilation, a wound opened in space, an echo of the queer.

For me, migration is not only leaving Fikirtepe but confronting its fragility each time I return in memory. The homes and streets I recall are gone. My memory calls, but no house remains.

In the new apartments I moved, my body never felt in place. My memory lingers in Fikirtepe's squatter houses, backyards, and shared rhythms, while the new spaces leave me outside.

Since leaving, I cannot say "this is my place." Migration is an unstable threshold. Between what Fikirtepe was and what the present is, I sway.

Migration, in this sense, is collective. The undoing of familiar orientations in the name of progress. It exposes the fragility of memory; the body feels estranged even where assigned (Ahmed, 2000, pp. 9–12). A disloyalty between time and space, where exile unsettles being-at-home (Trigg, 2006, p. 59).

Urban transformation repeats dislocations at the scale of communities. It promises equality while redrawing justice. Plans rename space, reports define truth, residents fall silent.

Life is compressed into demolition-construction-delivery, erasing memory and belonging, shifting wealth upward.⁴

Rumors lingered for years. Which street will fall? Who will count as owner? Residents of Fikirtepe delayed life decisions under the weight of uncertainty on urban transformation.

Eventually blocks merged and deals with contractors became unavoidable. Some left, some stayed, many were displaced even before demolition. The neighbourhoods became both inhabited and ruined at once. For several years.

Abandoned buildings cracked and emptied, later sheltering Syrian refugees who stretched tarps and sheets to rebuild life -remember the nylon in 1960-.

Today the luxury housing built here is marketed to wealthy investors on international platforms.

⁴ In Türkiye, neoliberal reforms of the 1980s set the stage; the 1999 Marmara earthquake legitimized risky-area designations; by the 2000s, state-developer alliances institutionalized reconstruction under the rhetoric of safety and modern living.

I returned to Fikirtepe one last time before demolition. Our building stood empty, ruined; windows, doors, railings stripped, wires hanging loose. The central stair opened to the sky, exposed when the neighboring block was torn down.

I still remembered where we once hung curtains. Staring at that cold wall from afar, I felt how far the past had already moved on (Figure 9).

Figure 9

The cruelest palimpsest



In Volissos I climbed the stone slope. The middle of each step was polished by feet not mine, edges tufted with grass. Each step carried a history of passage, and with every lift of my body I felt displaced, moving through lines already drawn. At the crest a ruined façade opened; its window hollow, staring back like a dark eye. Behind it the sky split into pink and blue, the church dome glowing red in the light of dusk.

The warmth of the stones had drained, their chill pressed into my bare feet. I migrated.

A summer evening in Fikirtepe, gathered at the fronts of apartment blocks. By the garden wall a stove burned; on its grate corn charred over coals. Wooden crates stacked beside plastic basins overflowing with husks. Neighbors crouched on low stools, hands quick, husks crackling. Smoke from the coals rose, mixing the bite of coal with the sweet heat of corn.

window void like an eye. sky split pink and blue. dome glowing red. stove round. grate tilted. embers glowing. steps polished by feet. knees almost touching. edges sprouting grass. wooden crate. husks heaped. fragments scattered. wall darkened. neighbors gathered close. circle formed at the threshold.

Some ruins are lucky. Even born of trauma, they slip through the cracks of the normative, opening freedoms, becoming fluid existences, staying queer. The ruins in Volissos are like this; within loss, new possibilities sprout.

The ruins of Fikirtepe were not so lucky. For some time they stood as a ruined neighborhood, but without giving birth to new worlds. They were demolished; in their place rose towers and gated blocks. Silenced before they could multiply their cracks, before they could carry their potentials.

And as I write, I mourn their silence, our silence.

NO CLOSURE IN RUIN

My article was an experiment in two ways. I tried to show how queer bodies and ruins can generate epistemologies of justice and to queer methodology by writing them ruinously.

In my article I offered a new methodology, ruinous autoethnography, to build a way of writing from the spatio-temporal experience of a queer body, in ontological relation with ruin and opening toward questions of spatial justice.

It emerged like the ruins it studied.

I believe, this showed that writing from queer positions can queer form, methodology, and epistemology. When the broken condition of the ruin is carried into the article, the academic form loses its normative expectation of completeness.

With justice theory meeting queer theory, I saw justice as bend and friction: who can stand, who is erased, whose presence counts. In my reading, cracks became the places where queer spatial justice begins; orientations the small gestures of fairness; migration a queer disorientation.

Fikirtepe's stories of migration and marginalization became evidence of how recognition and erasure carve themselves into the city.

The contrast between Volissos and Fikirtepe proves this fragility; one set of ruins slipped through cracks and opened life, the other was silenced before it could multiply.

Ruin is political. But the fate of ruins is political as well. Which ruins are allowed to endure, and which are silenced or erased; it is decided by politics on social, cultural, economical aspects.

I tried to ground this theory in life-texts; myself and the stories of Fikirtepe and Volissos. Through the dramaturgy of epiphanies, also, I tried to make theory tangible. In Volissos epiphanies on Fikirtepe, *mnemonic space*, *epimnemonic projection*, and *epiphenomenal space* could be sensed.

Writing became a site of witnessing-with. I refuse to keep pain private or to silence it. What rises in my throat, I hope, will reach other throats.

Acknowledgement

This article was produced as part of the doctoral dissertation entitled 'Ruin: A Critical Expansion on the Epistemologic Universe of Architecture,' conducted under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Ayşe Şentürer at the Graduate School of Istanbul Technical University.

Funding

No funding.

Ethical statement

This study is based on autoethnographic reflection and does not involve human participants requiring ethical approval.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Author contributions

Uğur Sarışen developed the study and wrote the manuscript. Ayşe Şentürer provided supervision and critical review.

Data availability

No external dataset was used.

AI disclosure

No generative AI tools were used in the production of this manuscript.

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Uğur Sarışen is an architect and researcher based in Istanbul, Türkiye, a research assistant at the Department of Architecture at Istanbul Technical University (ITU). His research critically examines the ontological dimensions and transformative potentials of space, with a focus on architectural otherness, queer spatiality, and post-anthropocentric thought. His ongoing PhD in Architectural Design at ITU develops the concept of ruinous autographies as transdisciplinary methodology to investigate the spatio-temporal dynamics of architectural otherness.

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Book review

Reconfiguring Spatial Practices Through Dance: Collaborative Processes of Being-With in Dance, Architecture and Engineering by Adesola Akinleye

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

Citation: Hahn, J. M. (2026). Reconfiguring spatial practices through dance: Collaborative processes of being-with in dance, architecture and engineering by Adesola Akinleye. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(2), Article 30. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/19078>

Published: August 27, 2026

ABSTRACT

Review of the book, *Dance, Architecture and Engineering*, by Adesola Akinleye.

Keywords: dance, philosophy, being-in-place, interdisciplinary collaboration, feminist spatial practices

Interdisciplinary artist and scholar Adesola Akinleye examines feminist spatial practices through a series of embodied inquiries that dance in relationship with the environment, functioning as an emergent dialogical experience of becoming. As an engaged transdisciplinary conversation, Akinleye's text, *Dance, Architecture and Engineering*, is written as a rhizomatic structural weave containing a hypertext of essays, poems, movement investigations, and interviews. Grounded in Practice as Research and John Dewey's pragmatism, while drawing upon feminist, decolonial, and queer theories, Akinleye proposes a 'Being-in-Place' methodological framework to discuss how bodies and environments co-constitute one another through transactional exchanges. This holistic framework as praxis demonstrates how a reframing of the grammar and syntax of both verbal and movement languages can contribute to collaborators in dance, architecture, and engineering to think together and reconstitute the flow of capitalist-based urban design.

Akinleye's choreography for this text is a rhizome of chapters containing poems, links to performance videos, photographs, and interviews that guide the reader through a meandering and at times non-linear path across the text. This multimodal strategy highlights a relational and movement-based approach to meaning-making and knowledge production through the dancing body, which serves as an onto-epistemological embodiment of what Emeritus Professor Robin Nelson regards as the interrelationship between 'being-doing-knowing' (Nelson, 2022, p. 46). An opening glossary frames the subsequent chapters, allowing readers to engage with the specific usage of terminology, including the integration of Dewey's philosophical language. The terminology addresses identity and choreographic considerations, such as space, time, place, and rhythm, as integral elements in meaning-making processes. Part One is an in-depth description of the 'Being-in-Place' framework, utilizing Dewey's concepts in dialogue with Akinleye's prism of dancing with the environment. Part Two chronicles themes arising from Akinleye's investigations during *Choreographing the City: as/ at the city limits* (2019-2020) projects and highlights two primary areas of inquiry: *Chasing Stillness* and *Lingering in Dwelling/Residing in Wandering*. Part Three includes interviews with creative researcher John Bingham-Hall, choreographer Liz Lerman, sociologist Richard Sennett, and choreographer Dianne McIntyre. They propose an art of infrastructure and advocate for designing responsive environments that support becoming, through meaningful relational interactions.

Arising from an awareness of being in relationship with bodily, conversational, and environmental exchanges, the heterogeneity of Akinleye's lexicon, as introduced in the glossary, cultivates a holistic approach to feminist spatial practices as an emergent collaborative process. Akinleye's key terminology offers alternative rhythms while traversing built environments that privilege the ease of movement for specific raced, classed, and gendered individuals. To destabilize the economy of movement steeped in the built environment, Akinleye develops in Part One the 'Being-in-Place' methodological framework. 'Being-in-Place' is an embodied 'world in a transactional relationship' (Akinleye, 2021, p. 67) of emplacement which consists of place-making practices that arise due to an agentic attunement to the collaborative and relational interactivity of somatic, cultural, social, and environmental systems, including humans' sensorial relationships with the built and natural environments. By linking choreographic concepts from the glossary within the framework, Akinleye acknowledges how weight, as one example, can function as a practice of mutual bearing, discussing how bodies and structures meet and adjust. Consequently, rhythm becomes a negotiated field of temporal affordances, operating as an emergent terrain for pace-making. Drawing upon examples from personal choreographic inquiries, Akinleye excavates inclusive approaches to dance as an interaction that anyone can engage in to create meaning and understanding during a dance experience. To further reinforce this point, Akinleye proposes 'choreo-thinking,' a movement-based mind-body dialogue that helps make meaning and develop what Margaret Whitehead calls 'physical literacy' through dance. These techniques, approaches, and perspectives provided generative pathways during Akinleye's conversations and workshops with engineers and architects.

Part Two describes *Chasing Stillness* and *Lingering in Dwelling/Residing in Wandering* as themes arising from the *Choreographing the City: as/at the city limits* projects. According to Akinleye, *Chasing Stillness* is a collaborative experience that allows individuals to tread outside the normative rhythmic structure of a place, thereby renewing a personal sensorial relationship with the environment. An example from the text includes a description of when Akinleye performs a sunrise dance on the London Bridge, intervening with the cadence of morning commuters to test how stillness functions as a relational presence that redefines the conventional definition of it as an absence of movement. While engaging in stillness, Akinleye incorporates Black Studies Professor McKittrick's (2006) discussion of tactical embodiments of Black women's geographies to resist the 'un-rhythmic and therefore relationship-less' (Akinleye, 2021, p. 71) subjugation of Black women's epistemological perspectives. Further supporting the 'Being-in-Place' framework, *Lingering in Dwelling/Residing in Wandering* acknowledges the polyrhythmic vibrations of movement and place in dialogue, attending to the tensions created by contrasting rhythmic variations. 'Hyper-invisible' (Akinleye, 2021, p. 93) people are a vivid example that appears in this section as a QR code link featuring a series of short videos titled *Five Films of Research and Development*. This tapestry of poetry, Akinleye's slow dancing manipulated by the Isadora program, and other short works featuring bodies in various forms of digital manipulation, offers viewers and readers an opportunity to experience an immersive dialogue between dance, theories of corporeality, and the environment. Using animation, dancers fade in and out of focus, creating slippage between the (il)legibility of non-normative bodies and the built environment. Developing an awareness of this 'hyper-invisibility' (Akinleye, 2021, p. 91) offers Akinleye a chance to recreate 'landscapes of opportunity' (Akinleye, 2021, p. 83) by engaging with the generative 'Being-in-Place' framework.

Part Three contains four interviews that unpack how choreographers and researchers aim to rethink the limitations imposed on the built environment by economic pressures and sociopolitical norms. The first interview with John Bingham-Hall proposes how urbanism can cultivate 'infrastructures for engagement' (Akinleye, 2021, p. 99), where environmental flow can support the integration of various rhythmic responses. Liz Lerman reframes collaboration as 'bridging social capital' (Akinleye, 2021, p. 109) by naming boundary-crossing work where consent, attention, and care are choreographic as well as civic opportunities for reshaping social structures. Richard Sennett argues for crafting methods that stay open to adjustment and maintenance. Sennett's sentiments connect with Part Two's insistence on lingering and stillness as vibrant horizons for creating variations in design tempos. Dianne McIntyre offers 'spontaneous composition' (Akinleye, 2021, p. 120) to reinforce the collaborative responsiveness of emplacement, integrated with the 'Being-in-Place' framework, which treats the environment, body, and experience as transactional, rejecting mind-body dualisms and emphasizing situated, embodied knowing. Together, the interviews crystallize the book's focus, where choreography serves as a method for fostering collaborative relations, inviting artists, designers, engineers, and communities to engage in place-making efforts that can thrive together in polyrhythms that disrupt the speed of economic legibility.

This text is a valuable resource for artists, scholars, and individuals interested in transdisciplinary research methods and feminist spatial practices for investigating their relationships with the built and natural environments. Akinleye offers approaches to emplacement that emphasize the environment's role in shaping the texture of an embodied experience and provides perspectives to reconsider how urban plans, language, and movement structures/systems influence perception. This collaboration moves with New Materialist perspectives

and the concept of ‘intra-action’ described by philosopher Karen Barad, who claims ‘time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, and are iteratively reconfigured’ (Barad, 2007, p. IX). Dancing is a method for meaning-making, and Akinleye draws upon theories of corporeality to locate our bodies and understand how attention to embodied experience can shape alternative pathways of navigating the convergent cartographic terrain of body, identity, place, and design.

Swimming with this book's rhythms presents an opportunity to experience how dance-making practices and a philosophical unpacking of movement can offer an epistemic investigation of embodied inquiry as a contemplative process for navigating ideas, knowledge, and sensations through various forms of multimodal communication. Akinleye's investigation and scholarship contribute to the discourse on spatial practices by providing nuanced approaches to place-making that interweave feminist theory, Indigenous wisdom, and the pragmatists' philosophies. During this in-depth investigation of language's influence on perception, this text aligns with what Potawatomi botanist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer articulates as a ‘grammar of animacy’ (Kimmerer, 2017, p. 134), which, when revealed, can inspire a sense of belonging by deepening relationships during the co-emergence of place. Akinleye's deliberate approach to language, philosophical inquiry, and practice disrupts the negative impacts of derisive identity rhetoric, human exceptionalism, and the pervasiveness of dualistic thinking that attempts to devalue the body as a vibrant site of knowledge production and meaning-making.

Acknowledgement

Thank you to the editors of this special issue for their professional feedback.

Funding

No funding was provided for this book review.

Ethical statement

This book review was written in accordance with Lectito Publications ethical guidelines criteria.

Competing interests

The author declares that he is currently a Ph.D. candidate under the supervision of the author of the reviewed book. The author has provided an objective scholarly evaluation of the text.

Author contributions

This author claims sole responsibility for conceiving, reading, and drafting this book review.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable for this review.

AI disclosure

This review was written entirely by the author.

Biographical sketch

Jeremy M. Hahn is a scholar, dance educator, choreographer, and performer based in Los Angeles, California. His current research examines critical approaches to contemplative pedagogy by investigating how these pedagogical styles manifest across performance and educational contexts as ecologies of praxis that integrate embodied presence, reflexive inquiry, and multimodal art practices. He has an MFA in Dance from California State University, Long Beach, is a Ph.D. candidate in Dance at Texas Woman's University, and is a full-time lecturer in the Department of Theatre and New Dance at Cal Poly Pomona.

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