

the 'detraditionalisation' of the domestic interior

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abstract

Drawing on a close analysis of women's valuable contributions to the continuous design of Italian domestic interiors, this essay examines the nuanced processes of unplanning modernist dwellings as they materialise patriarchal systems of oppression. This study is based on feminist sociological theory, specifically Lisa Adkin's use of the concept of 'detraditionalisation', which highlights how traditional gender roles and spaces are destabilised in late modernity thanks to an increased reflexivity towards self- and gender identity. It focuses on the tensions that arise in an individual's relation with tradition, with clear implications on the planning, but also material and symbolic unplanning of interiors. This essay articulates the complex interplay between spatial systems of oppression and individual mechanisms of resistance highlighted by social theory and applies them to the domestic sphere. What emerges is the overlooked yet important contribution of women to the design of the home.

Part of a broader research project on post-war housing, this essay addresses contemporary domesticity in Italy, where a strong and nuanced relationship with tradition and patriarchy has historically shaped women's subjectivities and design choices. A closer look at Mario Ridolfi's Viale Etiopia housing complex in Rome (1955), supplemented by interviews with the inhabitants and photographs of its interiors, clarifies the dynamics anticipated above.

Through this study, detraditionalisation emerges as a new conceptual tool for the understanding of women's aesthetics and spatial design practices inside residential interiors. It also uncovers how socio-spatial change is gradually unfolding inside Italian homes, and how this has led to a partial unplanning of the Italian modernist dwelling. Detraditionalisation ultimately serves as a bridge between feminist sociology and architectural and interior design theory, enabling the formulation of alternative and more inclusive narratives in the history and theory of interior design and architecture.

keywords

detraditionalisation; interiors; women; domesticity; sociology

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introduction

The conversation around gender and domesticity has advanced considerably in the last seven decades, moving away from the Western architectural canon to encompass multiple gender identities, in addition to social, cultural, and ethnic contexts.¹ However, the debate around the mechanisms that led to the consolidation of the Western home (designed for nuclear and heterosexual families) is not exhausted. It requires a disciplinary and epistemological shift away from canonical architectural history in order to be more inclusive of women's overlooked contributions. Architectural historians have demonstrated that symbolism associated with the male, 'public,' and female, 'private,' part of the house — usually referred to as the 'separate spheres paradigm' — is the most important boundary in a dwelling's design, and this dualism mirrors the heteronormative foundations of the Western home.² Feminine domesticity is socially and culturally produced and individually negotiated, but it is also closely tied to the domestic space and its interiors.³ This leads to further considerations of women's nuanced processes of forming and consolidating their inner selves in the home, along with their spatial manifestations (such as caring and household management, domestic consumption, and interior decoration), which have been insufficiently explored so far. In fact, as a consequence of the institutionalised, physical, and symbolic framework that confined women to the domestic sphere, they have been historically forced to negotiate their personal identities through embodied and cultural acts, spatial modifications, and aesthetic choices.⁴

This essay brings forward a feminist focus on ordinary stories of self-identity formation, their impact on the continuous design and redesign of the domestic space, and their significance for architectural and interior design history. It applies the gender dualism in the home to the dichotomy between 'planned' and 'unplanned' interiors advanced in this journal issue. Indeed, intentional planning of Western domestic interiors is saturated

with patriarchal values that, in turn, are resisted and dismantled — or physically and symbolically unplanned — by women's continuous design and appropriation of those same interior spaces. In other words, the fixity of the traditional patriarchal home is countered by the demolitions, flexible arrangements, and overall 'detraditionalisation' that women operate on those same material and symbolic divisions.⁵ The 'planned' domestic interior is, thus, continuously subject to a daily 'unplanning' by the women who inhabit that same space. By following the theory of feminist sociologists Lisa Adkins and Beverly Skeggs, this essay demonstrates that through this nuanced unplanning of their own domestic interiors, women not only negotiate and define their own femininity and self-identity, but they are also design agents worthy of the design and architectural historian's attention.⁶

It is important to point out that this process is neither obvious nor clearly manifested. It is rather a nuanced interplay between mechanisms of internalisation and unconscious reproduction of stereotyped gender practices. It also includes small acts of resistance that are framed within known local, cultural boundaries — hence this essay's focus on a specific country, which will soon be addressed. Architectural historian and theorist Mark Wigley stressed more than once how women internalise the domestic, spatial order that confines them.⁷ Spatial design exerts disciplinary power as it often reflects interiorised mechanisms of preproduction of modernist, sexist binary thinking that reinforce the aforementioned split between genders inside the domestic space.⁸ Wigley believes 'the house enforces a pre-existing law [...]. The law of the house precedes the house,' and, therefore, considers this authoritative, disciplinary power a 'pre-architectural domain of social order,' claiming that the house is 'ignorant' of the 'violence it appears to frame.'⁹ This research sees Wigley's 'pre-existing law' as a manifestation of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's habitus, which describes the internalised behaviours that are reproduced through enculturated acts and architectural design.¹⁰ Notably, Wigley writes that

the domestic space fits within a 'patriarchal grid' (a planned, modernist home that reflects sexist principles), which distinctly recalls Bourdieu's idea of fitting subjective structures within objective frameworks for the reproduction of cultural capital and habitus.¹¹

Adkins and Skeggs's work opens to social change through Bourdieu's theory; it is possible to determine that this 'fit' or, conversely, misalignment between the architectural plan and the inhabitant are the basis for, respectively, the reproduction of patriarchal order, or, alternatively, social and spatial change at both an individual and collective level.¹² Specifically, Adkins's feminist reading of the concept of detraditionalisation explains how, in late modernity, traditional social norms that govern gender roles and family structures are challenged thanks to an increased reflexivity towards one's self-identity, especially from a female perspective.¹³ There exists, in fact, a direct relationship between individual acts and spatial change as a result of unplanning practices: modifications of the interior dwelling layout that emerge from the interaction with architectural space are driven both at a physical and intangible level by habitus and, from this interaction, individual selves and spaces are altered. These reflections intertwine with processes of consolidation of self-identity through homemaking, intimate practices, and object-related narratives.

It is then possible to outline a clear disconnection between male architects' ideological schemes and planned structures — materialised in the dwelling plan of the twentieth century — and feminine practices of resistance (including unplanning and detraditionalisation) that take place inside the home. This tension is particularly evident in housing projects built in the country under study: Italy. The spatialisation of gendered and enculturated practices can be easily read through an analysis of the middle-class apartment plan. Indeed, stereotypical heteropatriarchal and cultural codes, norms, and behaviours still play a crucial role in contemporary Italian domesticity. A clear example

is the enculturated practice of preparing meals, which still confines women to the kitchen. Food plays a central role in Italy's national identity and influences not only Italians' daily life, but also the design of dwellings and women's gender and self-identity. The analysis of Italian apartments ultimately demonstrates that only a few social changes were registered by architects, which often reinforced traditional values through their architectural plans. Women, however, reacted to these circumstances by breaking the patriarchal, spatial order that forced them into their stereotypical roles and spaces, taking ownership of the continuous design of the domestic interior beyond its planned functions and spaces.

Feminist sociological theory by Atkins and Skeggs that emerged from the writings of Bourdieu frames this investigation and introduces detraditionalisation both as a methodology of this study, and a relevant aspect of the spatial and symbolic unplanning of the patriarchal dwelling. This essay also illuminates women's spatial agency and valuable design contribution that has the potential to expand beyond canonical architectural and design histories. Because these spatial alterations are both subtle and commonly disregarded, ethnographic methods were implemented in this study, including semi-structured interviews and photographs taken inside Italian domestic interiors designed in the post-war era. This essay addresses only a small portion of a decade-long study spanning Italy and France, with dozens of interiors studied and inhabitants interviewed. Given the scope of this text, priority will be given to one relevant case study, the modernist towers built in Viale Etiopia, Rome, by Mario Ridolfi and Wolfgang Frankl (1955). This project exemplifies the evident detachment between architects' planned spaces and inhabitants' small acts of unplanning, which is even more apparent in Italy's traditional cultural context, where modernity, however imposed (during fascism) or advertised (through the media in the post-war period), was never fully assimilated.¹⁴

tradionalisation

The nineteenth-century process of national and cultural unification of Italy took place through the consolidation of its culinary culture and the homogenisation of social classes, along with the construction of a national character based on strong gender hierarchies and the cornerstone of Italian identity: the Catholic, nuclear family.¹⁵ Confined in their domestic role, women have not only been the guardians of Italy's food culture in its intimate and popularised form — at the origins of the constructed myth of Italy's peasant cuisine — but they have also been able to express themselves through the decoration of their homes.¹⁶ The process of construction of Italian women's self-identity within these constraining conditions qualifies this research. It is important to note that the social changes relevant to this analysis occurred between the 1960s and 1970s, when middle-class women began entering the labour market en masse. Despite the extra-domestic occupation, Italian women were expected to carry out their unpaid housework. Sociologist and politician Laura Balbo theorised the 'double presence' that, still today, 'indicates a working condition, continuous intertwining between work and domestic needs, a disposition to act and think in a transversal way with respect to the different worlds.'¹⁷ This means women continued performing their caring role on top of being employed elsewhere, 'which is institutionalised beyond the family (state welfare, education, labour market) and impacts upon household organisation.'¹⁸ Double presence, then, on the one hand demonstrates the emergence of a new social order that moves beyond the modernist paradigm of the separate spheres and, on the other hand, acknowledges the persistence of dynamics of subjugation and control in women's lives. Nevertheless, this circumstance allowed women to rethink their traditional roles and carve out space for personal development. Historian Lucetta Scaraffia indeed clarifies that:

an élite of women has begun to give voice, both in public and in private, to self-reflection. They have begun to build in the first person, at least in part, their own social image. This work

of redefining one's own identity starts from the very roots of the perception of reality.¹⁹

As anticipated, stereotyped versions of femininity and masculinity persisted in Italy even after the trauma of the Fascist regime and the World Wars. Historian Enrica Asquer clarifies that, from the post-war period onwards, within Italian families existed an 'intertwining of ambivalent and painful feelings, which nailed many Italian women to domesticity.'²⁰ Specifically, men 'were all a bit torn, because they had come out for centuries of total supremacy, so they did not dare to say "you stay at home!", but that was what they wanted.'²¹ Notably, the changes caused by Italian women joining the labour force were at the root of a widespread sense of nostalgia for traditional society that was seen as a more coherent and stable world.²² This nostalgia characterises the middle-class conservatism of the generation of homeowners (born after the end of World War II) that inhabit housing complexes such as the one designed by Ridolfi and Frankl in Viale Etiopia.

The neo-traditionalist turn in Italian politics confirms the slow consolidation of traditional gender and family relations across Italian society, which clearly affects domesticity and the design of middle-class dwellings.²³ Italian women continued to pay the cost of Italy's social involution, as most of them had not been able to break away from their traditional domestic role. They had, therefore, no other choice than to rework traditional roles, spaces, and practices to affirm themselves and their individuality. The current skyrocketing rates of domestic violence in Italy could be explained by the reactionary, traditionalist pull of Italian heteropatriarchal society and women's constant negotiation of their social position vis-à-vis social change and conservatism, torn between adherence to the secure horizon of tradition and their personal aspirations.²⁴

These are precisely the circumstances described by Atkins, as women's presence and contributions to the public and political spheres had been prompting that reflexivity at the basis of detraditionalisation. The institutionalisation of 'double presence' guarantees

a continuation of women's traditional role, yet it opens to new spaces for self-reflection, hence subtle change and the consequent unplanning of the spatial structures that confine them. However, it is precisely the persistence of patriarchal order and social expectations towards women's domestic duties that characterise their subtle reactions. However relevant to this study, these initiatives are commonly disregarded by architecture and design historians. This is explained by design historian Penny Sparke, who argues that the aesthetic canon of the dominant culture is masculine; consequently, women's tastes and aesthetic choices have been stereotypically branded as 'trivial' or, worse, 'kitsch' [Fig. 01].²⁵ Aesthetic judgement and value attribution in architecture and design was, and still is, tied to a masculine experience of modernity that has pushed women's design contributions to the margins of architectural and design history. As a result, women's spatial and aesthetic choices have been overlooked by historians until recently, and women have been systematically excluded from the dominant aesthetic culture.²⁶ As Bourdieu explains, this privilege has been justified by the judgement of taste, whose criteria are defined precisely by the élite white men who enforced distinction and defined the boundaries of high culture.²⁷

Sparke describes women's overlooked interior design contribution to domestic interiors as 'conservative modernism'.²⁸ According to her, the latter was promoted through the media and it became 'embedded as an ideal across class lines in interwar society' even if it 'resembled that of Victorian society nearly a century earlier'.²⁹ Most importantly, conservative modernism led to a 'resistance to the model of modernity that women were being asked to negotiate' so, '[i]nvariably, the bulk of their work resided somewhere in the middle, blending modernist ideals with those of feminine domesticity'.³⁰ This is precisely how detraditionalisation unfolds and how the patriarchal dwelling is gradually unplanned; a version of modernist living is imposed and proposed as the aesthetic and spatial canon, and women's deviation from these precepts is disregarded and

denigrated. Their choice of rejecting the modernist minimalist aesthetic because of the negotiation of their modern identity leads to an overt preference for a more nostalgic taste in interior decoration [Fig. 01]. Moreover, each of their proposed deviations from intended uses and functions gradually reconfigures the order imposed in these interiors, contributing to its symbolic unplanning.³¹



Figure 01.

Post-war Interiors, Rome (Italy), 2019. Photograph: Francesca Forlini, 2019.

In this regard, anthropologist Daniel Miller explained that women's household activities do not prevent self-actualisation, and the emergence of conservative aesthetic trends in the domestic realm does not necessarily entail a passive reproduction of traditional family hierarchies and, to put in Bourdieu's terms, habitus.³² However, it is precisely through the reworking of traditional structures that it is possible to rethink gender and self-identities and, above all, dismantle the patriarchal order intertwined with the planned domestic interior.³³ Women's negotiated face of modernity could be understood once again through the lenses of Adkins's theory, as femininity encompasses an 'ambiguity at the heart of gender and sexuality reproduction' and so could be simultaneously reactionary and revolutionary; it is also characterised by an effort in producing 'comfort (via home, estrangement, boundary maintenance) or ontological security to overcome the ambivalence that beats the heart of being human'.³⁴

Architect Mario Ridolfi and Wolfgang Frankl's Modernist housing project in Rome (1955) is a particularly interesting case study as it exemplifies the dynamics introduced in this essay. The residential estate, visited during fieldwork, was considered by many a successful project, as the architect perfected some of the architectural solutions experimented in previous housing complexes, including the multiplication of dwelling typologies, more generous interior spaces, shared green areas, and refined decorations on each facade [Figs. 02 and 03]. The eight rectangular towers (nine-ten floors) represent a significant example of Italy's post-war reconstruction efforts, though targeted to the middle class. The towers granted a high population density while enabling a proper lighting of the generous collective spaces [Fig. 02].³⁵

The door that separates the dwellings' living room, or *salotto* in Italian, from the kitchen is considered a particularly important symbolic and physical threshold that encapsulates the mechanisms described so far. Faithful to the modernist separate spheres principles, the former is indeed the representative, public portion of the dwelling (associated with the masculine portion of the interior), while the latter is, as elsewhere in the world, the quintessential feminine space in the home. Figure 03, specifically, shows how the original layout (on the left) is completely altered in the apartment on the right, materialising the symbolic unplanning that has only been described in theory until now. The dividing wall in question is, indeed, a

mental boundary that has preserved the *salotto* up to now. It was preserved for guests but also for the inhabitants, for that need to feel part of a wider social dimension, identified in the "moral theatricality" of bourgeois decor. The latter has been able to preserve itself since the daily disorder, the needs of the body, intimacy, had a place to express themselves.³⁶

Once again, these mental and symbolic boundaries coincide with the Italian separation of gendered



Figure 02.
Towers in Viale Etiopia, Mario Ridolfi and Wolfgang Frankl arch. Rome (1949–55). Photograph: Francesca Forlini, 2019.

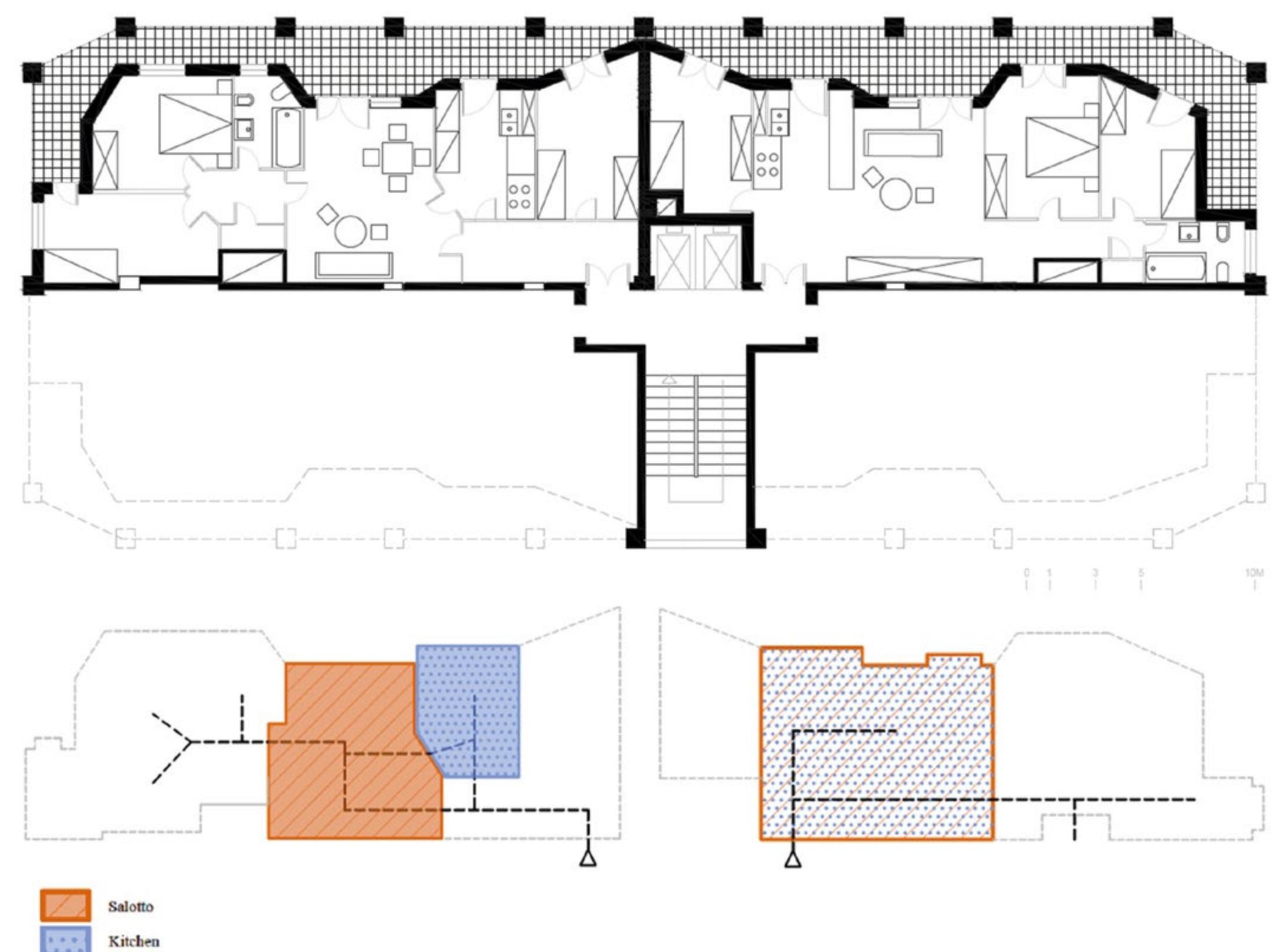


Figure 03.
Plan and distribution diagram of Mario Ridolfi and Wolfgang Frankl's Towers in Viale Etiopia, Rome (1949–55).

spheres in the home. The *salotto* — qualified by the central symbol of the patriarchal family, the *ricorrenze* table (table for recurring events) — is as untouchable and unreachable as if it is the head of the family [Fig. 04].³⁷ The room is devoted to the representation of the social class and status of the family, which coincides with the social position and occupation of the husband and father. In other words, the use of the *salotto* remains limited to important events. It is characterised by a large

table for the *ricorrenze* positioned in its centre, often under a large chandelier, representing the heteropatriarchal, Catholic family and the centrality of Italy's culinary traditions. The arrangement of this piece of furniture is associated with reunited patriarchal families during meals, which has not only relevant cultural and religious meanings, but also strengthens gender and interpersonal hierarchies within the family.³⁸ The order that regulates the plan and arrangement of people and objects in space is symbolic, since it is based on the image to be projected to the outside world, which coincides with class conventions and structured interpersonal relations.³⁹ The centrality of traditional symbols and spaces such as the *salotto* and *ricorrenze* table, however, also makes them key sites for resistance and change, unplanning, and detraditionalisation.



Figure 04.
Ricorrenze table inside an apartment in Ridolfi and Frankl's Towers in Viale Etiopia. Photograph: Francesca Forlini, 2019.

detraditionalisation

Italy's projects of construction and consolidation of a national, middle-class identity based on the centrality of both food and the patriarchal family had repercussions on the distribution of modern dwellings.⁴⁰ The most important aspects of this process were the establishment of a cultural narrative that formed disciplined citizens, the consolidation of a normalised social class with a clear identity, and the strengthening of gender hierarchies, all spatialised in the kitchen and *salotto* throughout the twentieth century.⁴¹ As food preparation and consumption gained a central role in this process, grandmothers became the embodiment of Italian food culture, the true custodians of genuine Italian tradition (which, as Piero Meldini has proved in his work, is as fictitious a cultural construct as the alleged inferiority of women).⁴² Surprisingly, though, it is precisely within the arena of culinary culture that new social change is emerging today. Indeed, women have been rethinking their positions towards housework, including food preparation.⁴³ Tellingly, some women developed a rejection of cooking as 'the refusal of food camouflages that of the kitchen, the home, marriage, motherhood and, in short, the traditional role of women.'⁴⁴ In essence, they reacted in different ways to the oppressive system that kept forcing them into stereotyped roles, rethinking both the architectural space, enculturated domestic practices, and consumption choices.

Adkins' social theory opens up, once again, to women's reaction to backward roles and oppressive systems in late modernity.⁴⁵ She argues that the movement of women into the labour market and the subsequent 'feminization of public spheres of action' led to 'a critical reflexivity on the part of men and women via-à-vis gender norms to a detraditionalization of those norms.'⁴⁶ This is a particularly sensitive aspect of her theory, as it introduces social change within existing structures, specifically a 'reworking of the social categories of gender', problematising the gender spheres paradigm and influencing gendered practices.⁴⁷

But Adkins' point can indeed extend to women at large, as the detraditionalisation of gender leads to substantial changes in both habitus and space (which she refers to as 'field') — that is, in both social and domestic behaviour. Given the centrality and symbolism of the *salotto* and kitchen in the Italian home — alongside the objects contained — their design and disposition determined the position of women within the architectural plan. It is the wall that divided the kitchen from the *salotto*, its presence or absence determining the relationship between habitus and field inside the Italian home, and it is precisely in the complex interplay between practices and spaces, social models and negotiated identities that a possibility for change in Italian society has emerged.

One inhabitant of Ridolfi's project [Fig. 03, apartment on the left, and Fig. 04] clearly explained the contrast between the representational *salotto* and the kitchen: 'everything took place inside the kitchen. In that small table that you see under the window, which widens, we ate in 5–6, tightly, when we had such a space [the *salotto*] that could not be touched!'⁴⁸ Another woman interviewed states that when their family used the *ricorrenze* table [Fig. 04], '[we used it] during our Christmas gatherings, during holidays, my father's birthday. When was his last birthday? It was in January, and we had dinner here. I moved this sofa, and we all had dinner here. [...] This was the space for parties even when I was a child, my mom used to organise parties here with canapés, sweets. It was always here in this room.'⁴⁹ The interviewee later added, 'While with my mother and the whole family we all tended to eat tightly in the kitchen, I changed this habit — I can't stay there, it's always hot — and so we always eat here [*ricorrenze* table].'⁵⁰ This subtle change could be compared to the gradual marginalisation of the *ricorrenze* table and its movement from the centre of the *salotto* towards the perimeter walls [Figs. 04 and 05]; in both cases, its symbolic role as centre of the heteropatriarchal family decreases without disappearing.

Socio-spatial change in Italy has been slowly emerging from women's gradual break from traditional habitus and field of action (the domestic one), which, according to Bourdieu, is at the basis of transforming practices.⁵¹ Adkins recognises how this connection of social transformations to a heightened awareness and critical reflexivity emerges precisely 'when there is discord between the previously routine adjustments of subjective and objective structures'; so habitus and field are asynchronous, because the field of action changes — in this specific case, from the domestic to the public sphere.⁵² This misalignment, or disconnection, alongside reflexive self-actualisation and the subsequent material, spatial change, are precisely the ingredients that make possible the physical and symbolic unplanning of the oppressive, symbolic power of the modernist, heteronormative, and patriarchal dwelling.

Sociologist Steph Lawler adds a further level of analysis to these dynamics, which questions the nature of resistance and domination by arguing that 'there is no "innocent" position: no resistance that is not in some way complicitous with power.'⁵³ She also refers to an important passage by Bourdieu: 'Resistance may be alienating, and submission may be liberating. Such is the paradox of the dominated, and there is no way out of it.'⁵⁴ Lawler partially agrees with Bourdieu and, provocatively, asks 'how liberating is it to cast off these marks of difference and to adopt a normalised (middle-class) habitus?' Women's design practices in the home seem to play out precisely at the intersection between resistance and domination, but 'there is a clear difference between individual forms of accommodation and resistance, and the overthrowing of systems of domination', meaning that it is possible to operate individual forms of resistance while remaining confined within systems of domination.⁵⁵ Adkins attributes change to an alteration in the structures of social reproduction.⁵⁶ Namely, the so-called detraditionalisation of gender emerges from a new reflexive approach towards gender norms and the internal distribution of modernist and sexist

separate spheres. Therefore, it is embedded within pre-existing systems of oppressions, stereotypical gender roles, and, as discussed, cultural constructs as well. To her, reflexivity must be distinguished from a liberal notion of freedom that emphasises the critical questioning or deconstruction of the normative frameworks governing gender and is, instead, 'linked to a reworking or refashioning of gender [...] [it] is perhaps better conceived as a habit of gender in late modernity.'⁵⁷ Her point clarifies women's constant push and pull between habitus, traditional roles, and the will to change, which coincides with the enhancement of one's individuality and selfhood. Much of this process takes place through nuanced spatial interventions and clear aesthetic choices, which make women active design agents and protagonists in the construction of their own (reflective) narratives of the self.

All in all, the Italian kitchen and the wall that divides it from the living room materialise the misalignment between women's subjectivities and the architectural space, with its physical demolition symbolising the change that is at the basis of detraditionalisation and the unplanning of the modernist dwelling. The inhabitants interviewed during fieldwork showed a propensity to respect past values, traditions, and existing spatial distributions. On certain occasions, they also demonstrated a will to break free from constricting spaces and rules. The decrease in the female presence at home has brought, for instance, some men closer to the kitchen.⁵⁸ Both women's lives outside the domestic sphere and their intimate and domestic practices have contributed to the consolidation of their inner selves, which is the outcome of not only interpersonal exchange but also a reflexive attitude towards their position in the social world and the family nucleus. It is widely acknowledged, however, that in today's dual-earner households an unequal division of domestic work persists, with a noticeable absence of Italian men in caring and emotional labour.⁵⁹

Few Italian men have developed an interest in food preparation in Italy, and two men interviewed during fieldwork demonstrated an interest in cooking that materialised in an interest in renovating their home. They are homeowners who recently inherited their childhood homes inside Ridolfi's housing complex [Figs. 02 and 03]. The interventions consist of the demolition of the dividing wall and the creation of an open plan kitchen [Fig. 03]. The owner of the apartment on the right in Figure 03 completed the renovation of his apartment, with an open plan living area that is rather radical in comparison to his neighbours' and, overall, all the apartments visited during fieldwork. What stands out is the complete absence of a dining table; both the kitchen and *ricorrenze* table are replaced by a large island. When asked the reasons behind these changes, he replied:

[It is due to] the need to have the space as open as possible. It is not dictated by fashion, I think it is a need rooted in us, a new generation that needs a little more space of conviviality. I don't like the closed kitchen. This is because the centre of the house has actually become the [open plan] kitchen. [...] Now the centre of the home and of conviviality is the kitchen. So having the island, for example, and this fact of being close, chatting, drinking, and cooking, is something you couldn't do before. Because you were closed in the kitchen, or everyone went into the kitchen — but it was narrow — so maybe this is the reason behind this need for openness.⁶⁰

The second homeowner shared with me some renderings of the renovation plan he intends to carry out inside his apartment [Fig. 03, left, and Figs. 04 and 05]. The interventions consist of the demolition of the kitchen-*salotto* dividing wall, the creation of an island, just like the previous apartment, and the persistence of a *ricorrenze* table and a large, heavy wooden display cabinet that was inherited and conserved in time currently located right in front of the same table [Figs. 04 and 05].



Figure 05.
Renderings of interior renovations inside an apartment in Ridolfi and Frankl's Towers in Viale Etiopia. Illustration: Alessandro Franzini, 2019.

His answer to my question on the reasons behind this renovation was particularly meaningful:

I knock[ed] this wall down because otherwise you won't spend time in this salotto. If I stay in the kitchen cooking, the others are not suffering the heat with me, they are over there [in the salotto] conversing. So you end up here alone, at best with someone who keeps you company, who maybe feels sorry for you [...]. Things change substantially if I tear the wall down, it becomes a true living space, usable, where you can really do everything you want, where there is no longer the problem that one feels isolated from the world [...]. And then the three doors that separate the salotto from the kitchen [...]. The fundamental factor is that the things have changed: it is no longer the same as before, when the woman was in the kitchen and stayed there.⁶¹

The consciousness of the gendered nature of the practice, and the identification of a spatial problem, are crucial as part of a reflexive process of identity formation that, although still too rarely, overrides stereotypical notions of gender and gendered practices. In fact, it is precisely when the man starts preparing meals that he realises the oppressive nature of domestic space. The embodied act, the gendered habitus, by changing its field of action generates change, and this change invests both

female and male identities. It is no wonder these mechanisms take place in the kitchen and are therefore characterised by the changing dynamics of food preparation and consumption. Important processes of detraditionalisation are slowly taking place inside Italian domestic interiors; however, it is worth underlining that spatial change must always relate to social change and, therefore, that the position of women vis-à-vis gender relations, habitus, and self-making should be equal, otherwise — as Adkins rightly pointed out in her writing — detraditionalisation is likely to be followed by a re-traditionalisation.

It is undeniable that these first manifestations of change in the domestic sphere, even in a country as conservative as Italy, are encouraging. However, gender equality in the domestic sphere remains to be achieved. Despite women's entry into the workforce over the past century, they are still expected to take care of the house, leading to tensions within the family unit.⁶² The remnants of these dynamics are evident in the interviewees' answers and materially deposited inside contemporary domestic interiors. As discussed, although men are taking on more domestic responsibilities, it is still not enough; on the contrary, they benefit from women's hyperproductivity and use their free time to strengthen extra-domestic, professional, and personal relationships (even within their homes).

conclusion

Double presence remains a fundamental component of Western women's lives and identities. Despite the contemporary blurring of the modernist public-private dichotomy in the home, women remain the centre of domestic life and caring. The gradual detraditionalisation process has led only to partial unplanning of the modernist dwelling.

Italian women became custodians of Italian domestic and culinary culture — that is, both the symbolic and spatial centre of Italian culture and home — and have learned to create room for emancipation

through the reproduction of traditional practices. Even while employed (hence experiencing a double presence), they have managed to make small spatial adjustments and modifications aimed at decentralising patriarchal power in the home. Given the oppressive, heteropatriarchal, and architectural framework that historically trapped women in the domestic sphere, the home became the ground of resistance that in turn shaped their self-identities. In other words, it is precisely within the objective frameworks — those of national culture, patriarchy, social class, economic systems, and the spatial organisation of the home — which shaped women's lived experiences and confined them within familiar stereotypes, that they nevertheless discovered avenues for self-expression. Women's spatial cultures and the constant unplanning and redesign of the domestic space are indeed based on the reworking of institutional frameworks that are often traditional or, alternatively, patriarchal and normative.

The term 'traditional' resonates with the key concepts of 'detraditionalisation' and 'retraditionalisation' advanced in this essay, which explain this process of negotiating personal and gender identities within oppressive, outdated, backward-looking, conservative, stereotypical models. The emergence of nuanced patterns of resistance, of original cultural, aesthetic, spatial interpretations and modifications, even if small and apparently insignificant, became valuable manifestations of women's spatial design practices and aesthetics in the domestic sphere. Despite the recent contribution of men to the same processes, the subordination of women in all domestic aspects unfortunately remains, but hints of socio-spatial change and the physical and symbolic unmaking of patriarchal boundaries in the Italian home create space for hope.

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author biography

Francesca Romana Forlini, PhD, is an architectural historian and theorist, educator, and editor. Her scholarship applies feminist theories to uncover overlooked architectural and design histories. She is a Fulbrighter and an alumna of the Royal College of Art and Harvard Graduate School of Design.

notes

- 1 See the writings of Beverly Skeggs, Lisa Adkins, Judy Attfield, Penny Sparke, Mary Douglas, Sarah Elsie Baker, Irene Cieraad, and Alison Clarke, among others.
- 2 Jane Randell, Barbara Penner, and Ian Borden, *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* (Routledge, 2000), p. 104. Moreover, an important source on the spatial division of gendered sphere and its relationship with domestic practices is Pierre Bourdieu's text on the Kabyle House, 'The Berber House or the World Reversed', *Social Science Information*, 9.2 (April 1970), pp. 151–170.
- 3 Randell, Penner, and Borden, *Gender Space Architecture*, p. 104.
- 4 Penny Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* (Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, 2010).
- 5 Detraditionalisation is explored by Lisa Adkins and Beverly Skeggs in their book *Feminism After Bourdieu* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2005).
- 6 Adkins and Skeggs, *Feminism After Bourdieu*. Skeggs and Atkins critically address the theory of Pierre Bourdieu, focusing on the mechanisms of formation and negotiation of the self. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Harvard University Press, 1984).
- 7 Mark Wigley, 'The Housing of Gender' in *Sexuality & Space*, ed. by Beatriz Colomina and Jennifer Bloomer (Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), p. 340.
- 8 Wigley, 'The Housing of Gender', p. 340.
- 9 Wigley, 'The Housing of Gender', p. 331.
- 10 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*.
- 11 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*.
- 12 Adkins and Skeggs, *Feminism after Bourdieu*.
- 13 Adkins and Skeggs, *Feminism after Bourdieu*. Notably, Adkins expands on the idea of detraditionalisation previously introduced by Anthony Giddens, Paul Heelas, and Scott Lash, among others.
- 14 Francesca R. Forlini, 'Salotto Buono: The "Art of Conservation" and the Permanence of an Italian Room', *Interiors*, 11.2–3 (2021), pp. 157–182, doi.org/10.1080/20419112.2021.1942616. See also Francesca R. Forlini, 'The House I'd Like to Have: Women's Spatial Cultures, Design, and Aesthetic in 20th Century Italy', *Interiority*, 7 (2024), pp. 41–60, doi.org/10.7454/in.v7i1.359.
- 15 Forlini, 'Salotto Buono'; Forlini, 'The House I'd Like to Have.'
- 16 Forlini, 'Salotto Buono'; Forlini, 'The House I'd Like to Have.'
- 17 Lorenza Zanuso, 'Studies on the Double Presence', in *La Ricerca delle Donne*, ed. by Maria Marcuzzo and Anna Rossi-Doria (Rosenberg & Seller, 1987), pp. 41–58 (p. 43) (author's translation).
- 18 Beverly Skeggs, 'Context and Background: Pierre Bourdieu's Analysis of Class, Gender and Sexuality', in *Feminism after Bourdieu*, pp. 19–33 (p. 22).
- 19 Lucetta Scaraffia, 'Essere Uomo. Essere Donna', in *La Famiglia Italiana dall'Ottocento a Oggi*, ed. by Piero Melograni (Laterza, 1988), pp. 193–258 (p. 251) (author's translation). See also E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Doubleday, 1956).
- 20 Enrica Asquer, *Storia Intima Dei Ceti Medi: Una Capitale e Una Periferia Nell'Italia Del Miracolo Economico* (Laterza, 2011), p. 172.
- 21 Asquer, *Storia Intima Dei Ceti Medi*, p. 172.
- 22 Scaraffia, 'Essere Uomo. Essere Donna', p. 250.
- 23 Andrea Donà, 'The Rise of the Radical Right in Italy: The Case of Fratelli d'Italia', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 27.5 (2022), pp. 775–794, doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2022.2113216.
- 24 Both Asquer and Scaraffia hint at these dynamics. Although Asquer's book was published in 2011, her reflections can apply to the current situation.
- 25 Regarding this matter, and in line with this text, Judy Attfield states: 'I want to argue that kitsch is a valid category of popular taste, that it conveys a pleasurable, aesthetic genuine experience, that it applies to many types of objects not necessarily those normally categorised as art; but can also apply to design and everyday things and that as such, it has political implications in making culture accessible. Positioning kitsch within a social context of popular taste recognizes popular culture as a more inclusive field of inquiry, it acknowledges the aestheticization of everyday life as a positive aspect of culture and allows the consideration of taste as part of the habitus, the material culture of everyday life.' Judy Attfield, 'Redefining Kitsch: The Politics of Design', *Home Cultures*, 3 (2006), pp. 201–12 (p. 207), doi.org/10.2752/174063106779090758.
- 26 Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink*.
- 27 Bourdieu, *Distinction*.
- 28 Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink*, p. XXIII.
- 29 Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink*, p. 98.
- 30 Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink*, p. 99.
- 31 This is particularly clear in the renowned case of Le Corbusier's Pessac housing complex, also known as Cité Frugès (1926). Only five years after its construction, the residential complex was appropriated by the inhabitants and visibly altered. They not only occupied the interior spaces with old-style furnishings and decorations, but also modified the architectural layout by adding pitched roofs over the roof-garden. For further information on this project see Philippe Boudon, *Lived-In Architecture: Le Corbusier's Pessac Revisited* (MIT Press, 1972).
- 32 Daniel Miller, 'Appropriating the State on the Council Estate', *Man*, 23.2 (1988), pp. 353–372, doi.org/10.2307/2802810.
- 33 Miller, 'Appropriating the State', pp. 353–372.
- 34 Skeggs, 'Context and Background', p. 29.
- 35 The presence of this room clarifies the social status of the inhabitants who were meant to occupy these buildings.
- 36 Asquer, *Storia Intima Dei Ceti Medi*, p. 44 (author's translation).
- 37 Forlini, 'Salotto Buono'. See also Maristella Casciato, 'L'Abitazione e gli Spazi Domestici' in *La Famiglia Italiana Dall'Ottocento a Oggi*, ed. by Piero Melograni (Laterza, 1988), pp. 525–588. In the same volume see also Pietro Meldini, 'A Tavola e in Cucina', pp. 417–464. Lastly, this topic is approached by Filippo De Pieri, Bruno Bonomo, Caramellino Gaia, and Zanfi Federico, *Storie Di Case: Abitare l'Italia del Boom* (Donzelli, 2014).
- 38 Forlini, 'Salotto Buono'; Meldini, 'A Tavola e in Cucina.'
- 39 Forlini, 'Salotto Buono'; Meldini, 'A Tavola e in Cucina.'
- 40 Forlini, 'Salotto Buono'; Meldini, 'A Tavola e in Cucina.' See also Giorgio Di Giorgio, *L'Alloggio ai Tempi dell'edilizia Sociale: dall'INA-Casa ai PEEP* (EdilStampa, 2011).
- 41 Forlini, 'Salotto Buono'; Meldini, 'A Tavola e in Cucina.'
- 42 Meldini, 'A Tavola e in Cucina.'
- 43 Meldini, 'A Tavola e in Cucina', p. 453.

- 44 Meldini, 'A Tavola e in Cucina', p. 453 (author's translation).
- 45 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 1990); Adkins and Skeggs, *Feminism after Bourdieu*.
- 46 Lisa Adkins, 'Introduction', in *Feminism after Bourdieu*, pp. 1–18 (p. 9).
- 47 Adkins, 'Introduction', p. 9.
- 48 Interview with a resident, Ridolfi's towers in Viale Etiopia, Rome, August 2019 (author's translation).
- 49 Interview with a resident (2019).
- 50 Interview with a resident (2019).
- 51 Adkins, 'Reflexivity: Freedom or Habit of Gender?' in *Feminism After Bourdieu*, pp. 196–198.
- 52 Adkins, 'Reflexivity', p. 196.
- 53 Steph Lawler, 'Rules of Engagement: Habitus, Power and Resistance', in *Feminism After Bourdieu*, pp. 110–128 (p. 122).
- 54 Steph Lawler, 'Rules of Engagement', p. 121.
- 55 Steph Lawler, 'Rules of Engagement', p. 121.
- 56 Steph Lawler, 'Rules of Engagement', p. 122.
- 57 Steph Lawler, 'Rules of Engagement', p. 122.
- 58 Laura Balbo, 'La doppia presenza' ('The Double Presence'), *Inchiesta*, 8.32 (1978), pp. 3–6; Irene Cieraad, "'Out of my kitchen!' Architecture, gender and domestic efficiency", *The Journal of Architecture*, 7 (2002), pp. 263–279, doi.org/10.1080/13602360210155456.
- 59 See Asquer, *Storia Intima dei Ceti Medi*.
- 60 Interview with a resident (2019).
- 61 Interview with a resident (2019).
- 62 Gabriella Oppedisano, "'Donna casalinga" e "uomo con i pantaloni", gli stereotipi resistono fra gli adolescenti', *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 21 April 2021 <<https://allegoop.ilsole24ore.com/2021/04/21/donna-casalinga-uomo-con-i-pantaloni-stereotipi-resistono-fra-adolescenti/>> [accessed 29 October 2023].