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Co-operative Housekeeping

A collective spatial answer to unpaid domestic work: In design as well as in politics, it has always been useful to refer to utopian models in order to challenge current norms. In the light of this, it appears interesting to understand Melusina Fey Pierce's model of Co-operative Housekeeping and consider it as a feminist inspiration for alternative forms of housing.

by B.M.

Unpaid care work is at the core of feminists' struggles and yet an unsolved question all around the world. Concurrently, housing layouts today keep reproducing gender segregation of labour, and the attempts to contrast the typology of the nuclear household with more progressive models are still not diffused in the architecture practices and in the housing market.

Dolores Hayden, one of the main experts on the subject, defines Co-operative Housekeeping, a concept introduced by Melusina Fey Pierce in the second half of the XIX century, as «a feminist critique of conventional dwellings.» In design as well as in politics, it has always been useful to refer to utopian models to challenge current norms. In the light of this, it appears interesting to understand what the Co-operative Housekeeping movement was and how it can still serve as inspiration for feminist forms of housing.

The American Grand Domestic Revolution took place between the 1860s and the 1930s in the context of the spring of co-operative union stores carried out by labour movements and feminist associations, such as anti-slavery and women suffrage movements, but also cooking and sewing circles. Its potential laid in the idea that progress should be brought about «inside the kitchen» and that women could unite to facilitate domestic labour in their lives.

During that time, feminists in the United States identified the economic exploitation of women's domestic labour as the founding cause of inequalities. In order to address this

issue, they proposed a complete transformation of spatial design regarding homes, neighbourhoods and cities. (For examples see the studies of kitchenless typologies, pages 42-43).

In 1869 Melusina Fey Pierce (1836-1923), an educated woman belonging to the bourgeoisie, who was critical toward the domestic economy and the limitation of women's freedom, coined the term Co-operative Housekeeping. In 1870 she formed the Co-operative Housekeeping Association in Boston to experiment with a model for carrying out housework collectively. In her manual «Co-operative Housekeeping: How not to do it and How to do it» she declared that women should act together to gain economic independency and free time to dedicate to the public sphere.

Co-operative Housekeeping was an elaborate economic system based on shares. Women united in a co-operative would sell products and services that were generally relegated to the sphere of unpaid house and care work in order to get economic profit and redistribute wages among the shareholders. (See page 45 for a diagram of the processes). Based on the ideal of the «self-made woman», the Co-operative Housekeeping model can be placed in early capitalist visions of profit making and social ladder scaling.

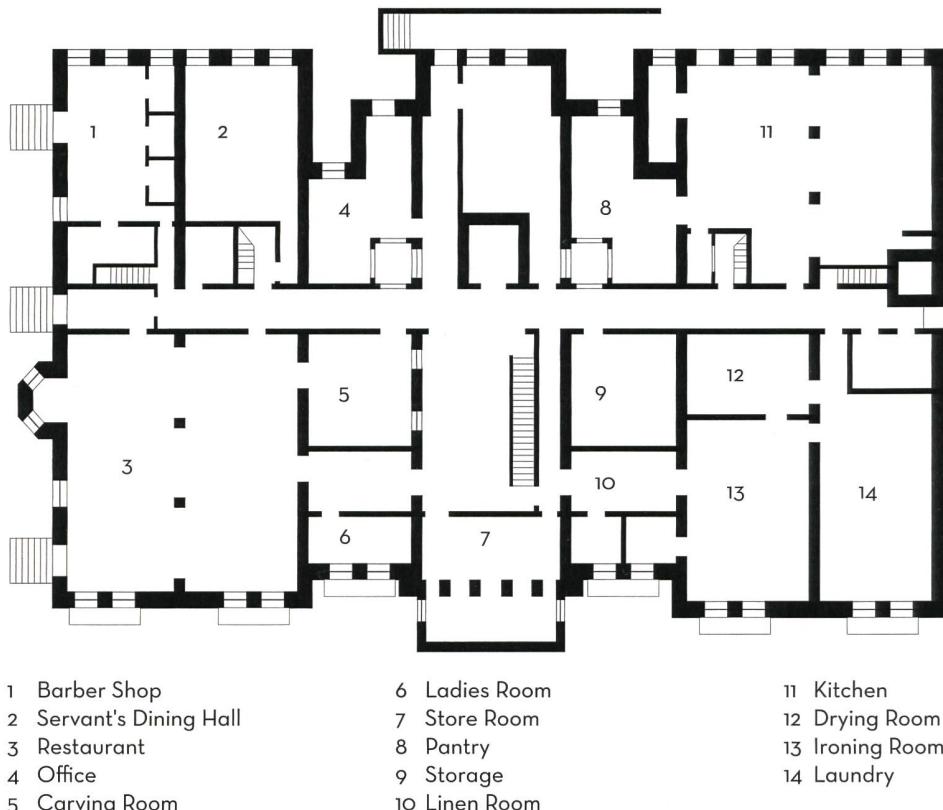
Furthermore, having at its core economic and labour co-operation, it aims to bring contemporary progress of work organization inside the household. At the same time, the scheme was meant to unite middle class women and their former servants and create relations

between women workers and the industrial class. In Pierce's idea, women from poorer classes could become full members of the co-operative by paying their share after having gained some profit from it.

For these reasons, Pierce's work attracted the interest of both capitalist and socialist factions.

Its success led to diverse experimental experiences. In 1870, Pierce herself conducted an experiment for a co-operative enterprise in

Boston. She founded the Cambridge Co-operative Housekeeping Society which organized a co-operative store, laundry, and bakery. However, the experiment ended unsuccessfully after only two years. On the one hand, it was hampered by the members' husbands. On the other hand, it involved exclusively educated women as managers while poorer women were actually responsible for the work, failing in its original purpose of challenging class and education privileges. ►



Co-operative Family Hotel, Henry Huston Holly, New York City, 1874

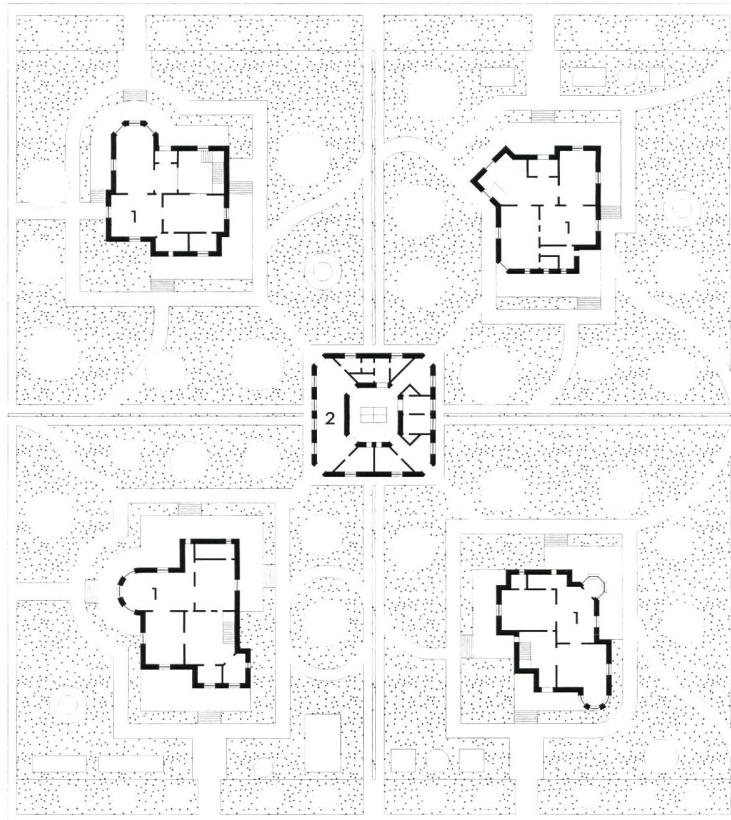
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Studies of kitchenless typologies - Note on the drawings on pages 44, 45 and 47

Pierce's pioneering work inspired other social reformers and designers to imagine neighborhoods revolving around collectivized housework. Far from being exclusively a utopian vision, it effected housing projects and neighbourhood organization in rural areas, suburbs, and city centers. The model was mainly responsible in creating the typology of the kitchenless house with shared facilities aiming to reduce private domestic work. Drawings are all by B.M.

However, Melusina Fey Pierce was still acclaimed at the time as a theoretician: within the context of industrialization and urbanization, her model led to the rethinking of living spaces and questioning of the physical division of collective space from the private household space, and domestic economy from political economy. In line with the evolution in housing typologies, she first tested her model on single family homes and then applied it to urban apartments blocks. She challenged the male dominated sphere of planning and design and in 1903 patented her own design for a co-operative apartment building with kit-

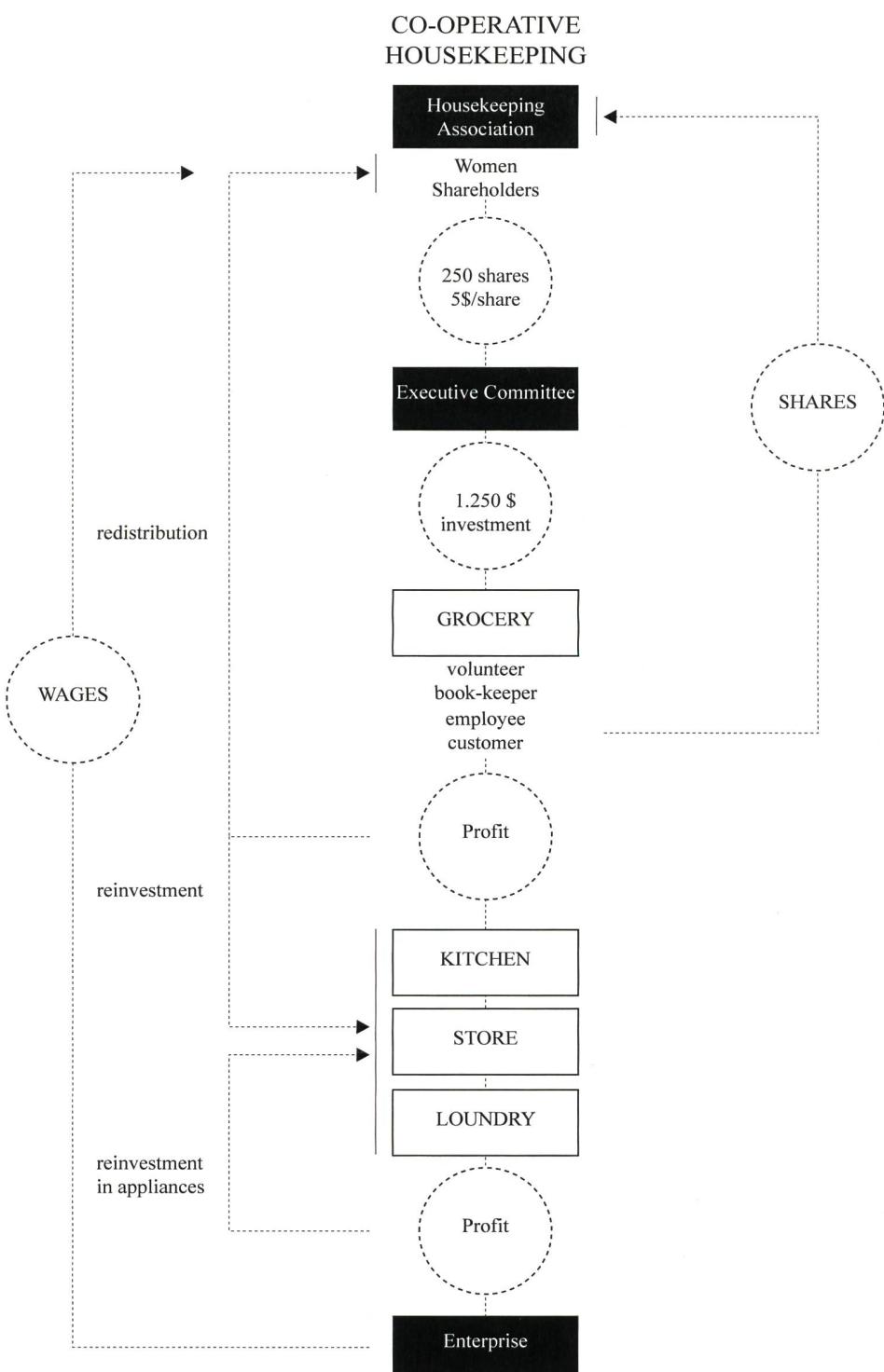
chenless units and shared facilities. Melusina Fey Pierce was radical for her time by trying to bridge class gaps and gender roles, but in practice her model still separated the spheres of work of women and men and targeted elite women. However, she gave a great contribution to the recognition of housekeeping as a job and acknowledged the economic dimension of gender emancipation and freedom. Her great input lies in the idea the women can unite and act together to change society starting from the domestic dimension.



1 Kitchenless House

2 Common Kitchen and Laundry

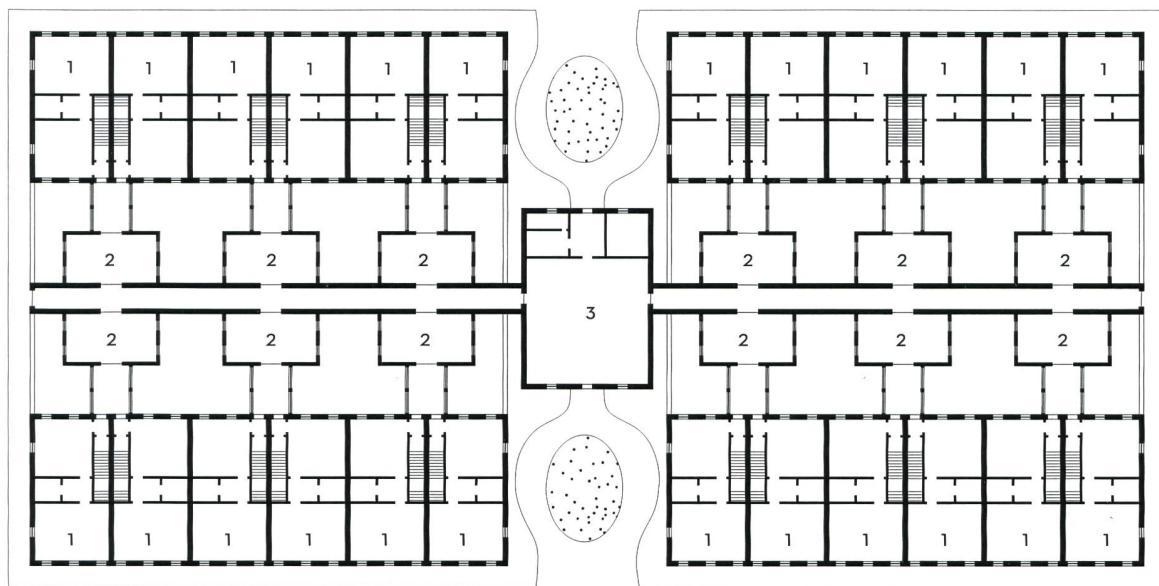
Plan for Block of Pacific Colony, Howland, Owen and Deery, 1885



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Note on the diagram

The Housekeeping Association consists of a group of 15-20 women that would unite to do together what they would usually do individually in their homes as a first step (sewing, cooking, washing laundry). They would then slowly set up a real enterprise providing goods and services at fair prices for the members, in spaces managed collectively such as a laundry, a bakery, a kitchen and a dry-goods store. Part of the profit would be reinvested in new appliances and in the improvement of the spaces, and part of it would be redistributed as wages among the shareholders.



1 Kitchenless House

2 Common Dining Room

3 Common Kitchen and Laundry

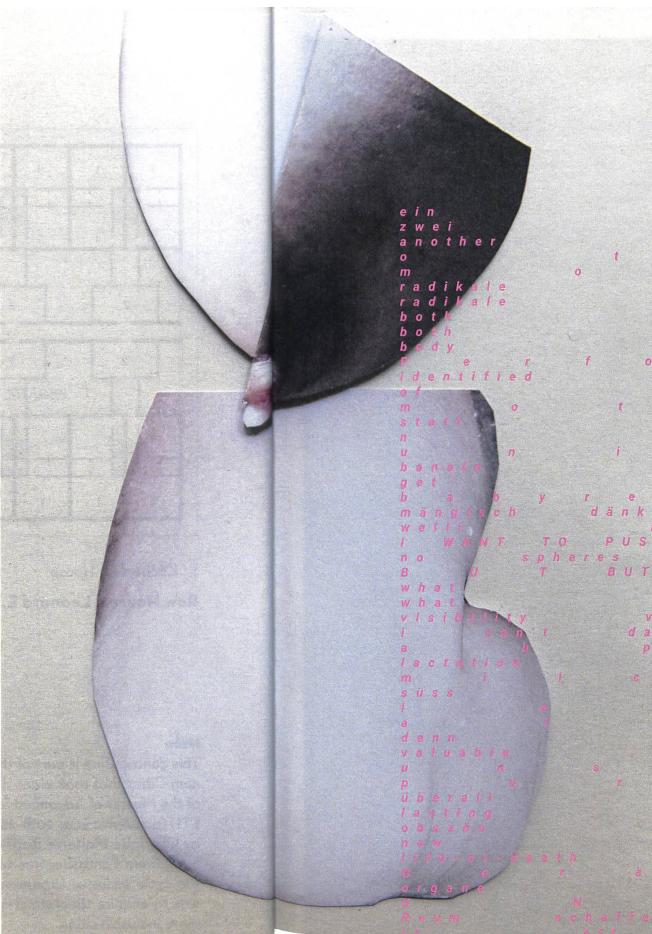
Raw Houses, Leonard E. Ladd, Philadelphia, 1890

Note

This contribution is part of the research exercise *Designing Cities* that took place during the second semester of the Master of Advanced Sciences in Urban Design at ETH (academic year 2018-2019). The program, directed by Charlotte Malterre-Barthes and the design practice Something Fantastic, was at its third and last year of the cycle *Inclusive Urbanism*. The goal of the exercise was to acquire theoretical and tactical tools to design more inclusive cities.

Bibliography and further reading

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- See also the ongoing research by Anna Puigjaner «Kitchenless City.»





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