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*«A look across the household section of any electronics store is full of words suggesting comfort, silence, speed, obscuring the fact that their operation entails work — housework, that is — most often performed by women.»*

## HONEY, I'M HOME! Claire Contamine, Victor Lortie

Claire Contamine, born 1994, is a curator and art historian based in Brussels. She holds a master of public law from Pantheon Assas University and a master of art history from Paris Sorbonne University. A former assistant curator at Palais de Tokyo in Paris then to the second edition of the Riga Biennial of Contemporary Art 2020, she is now production officer at Kanal Centre Pompidou in Brussels and co-curator of its online radio «Studio K». She also has an independent curatorial practice and has written for exhibition catalogues and art magazines such as «L'art même».

Victor Lortie, born 1996, ditched law school in 2017 to enroll in the architecture curriculum at TU Berlin. As chair of the Roundabout e.V. student association and member of student parliament, he is most interested in challenging the ways in which we think of and talk about architecture as a cultural practice. He recently co-edited the publication «Überbau. Produktionsverhältnisse der Architektur im Anthropozän», forthcoming 2021.



*Just as we were finishing this article on female comfort, for which we already had a fairly good introduction, we stumbled upon an interview. In the last week of June 2021, the president of the United States struck a deal with a group of senators on US\$ 1.2 trillion of spending on what they called «traditional» infrastructure. The Republican Party had adamantly refused the inclusion of any «non-traditional» infrastructure that would otherwise have been in the bill, saying child care, elder care, and care in general were not part of the things that kept the country running.*

*Louisiana Senator Bill Cassidy then was interviewed on NBC's «Meet The Press» on the merits of the deal and, without a hint of irony, uttered the following words into the camera: «my wife says that roads and bridges are a woman's problem, if you will. Because oftentimes, it is the woman, aside from commuting to work, who's also taking children to school. They're doing the shopping. And the more time she spends on that road, the less time she spends doing things of higher value.»<sup>(1)</sup> Credit where credit is due: we couldn't have said it better ourselves. In only 54 words, Cassidy brilliantly summarizes the way in which women's supposed comfort is weaponized in designing space to this day. Relieved by this man's grace of the daunting task to frame a subject in two paragraphs or less, we scrapped our introduction and decided to jump right in:*

Wielded as a crucial value of contemporary living after the two world wars, comfort seems to have in fact been used as a trick against women. Shaped by modernism, patriarchy, and capitalism, still informing the way we design space, the concept of comfort has long made women believe that domesticity was the core source of their well-being. Rather than providing support, we argue that comfort is simultaneously the carrot and the stick used in architecture and urban planning to «keep women in their place» that is: home. This article is an attempt to analyse the political relationships of space, and how domestic comfort can shift from being an expression of patriarchal power and control towards a universal and inclusive benefit.

This study is based on our own empirical experience of space and on the available research material — which is scarce in Europe and the Global North, and almost non-existent elsewhere. Alas, we thus look at the issue largely through a Eurocentric scope and Western standards, although we can assume that the mechanisms and issues around the concept of domesticity are deeply embedded worldwide. Precarity is still more common for women: with this term, we include all persons naturally assigned to female gender and those who identify themselves with it: they are all targeted by patriarchy!

Until the mid-18th — century in Western countries, housework was part of the family's main duties alongside productive work. Cooking, eating, sleeping were commonly done in the same central room. From that point in time, the onset of industrialization has brought about the same kind of change all over the globe: men's work has geographically shifted away from the spaces of common dwelling towards the newly redistributed and condensed means of production.<sup>(2)</sup> In «The Origins of Family, the Private Property and the State», socialist theorist Friedrich Engels traces the

social evolution that led to «the world historical defeat of the female sex» to the emergence of monogamous marriage and the patriarchal system forced by industrial modes of production under capitalism.<sup>(3)</sup> This monumental change means a stark shift for what it means to be «home»: while the places where men work and rest are mostly separate, women find themselves doing both in the same place. For the person doing the chores within it, the home conflates both spheres of value creation and recreation — production and reproduction, as Karl Marx would call them.<sup>(4)</sup> Only a century after the publication of Capital did Marxist feminists come to fight against the notion that the tasks of reproduction, even if they lack material productive output, are simply part of the natural process of society recreating its productive forces. Instead, they represent exploited labour: reproductive labour, as it would become known.<sup>(5)</sup> But this realization came too late, the new position of housewife had already emerged — a woman's status of literally being married to her house.

As a consequence, the urban segregation of women has been the byproduct of the way cities have been organised for productivity throughout the past century. The spatial separation of productive and care work has done a great deal to trap women at home, as political theorist Sherilyn MacGregor observed in her analysis of how North American suburbia, through its techniques of separation and flattening, created the necessity for a full-time position for women as housekeeper-cum-shuttle-service-for-the-kids far away from spaces of political and economic participation. This sub-urban experience is not limited to North America. Modernist city planning around the globe well into the second half of the 20th century separated men's workplaces from dormitory cities — satellite housing megastuctures for the reproduction of (male) labour forces fully detached from the factories and business districts where production actually took place.<sup>(7)</sup> Contrary to the separation of men's work places and their places of leisure, the simultaneous convergence of the places where women work and sleep essentially assigned them to residence. All that a woman was supposed to need during her day was right at hand: child care (at least in socialist countries), the supermarket, a hair salon, and the dry cleaner's.

This type of discourse has been, to this day, woven right into the urban fabric. Just as a distinct part of urban space was assigned to the job of the housewife, so emerged the designated workspace of the woman in the household. Female activities were forced into «service rooms» («dienende Räume») separated from «served rooms» («bediente Räume»), as architects like to call them in German. The kitchen, historically located centrally in family homes, was now increasingly becoming a woman's place — and a woman's place alone. For instance, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's Frankfurt Kitchen was thought of as the pinnacle of interior design in the 1920s. Second-wave feminists only later realized how the rationalization and simplification of chores in domestic care contributed to the conscription of women to the spaces where they were performed. The example of Schütte-Lihotzky shows us that these dispositives were not necessarily put in place with bad intentions,

but that the problem runs much more deeply: the increasing participation of women in the (so-called productive) workforce has consequently not translated into a decrease of reproductive work, but rather the generalisation of a «second shift» at home.<sup>(8)</sup>

This separation of male-coded and female-coded spaces through industrialization created a completely new set of problems: as men could organise for better working conditions, higher wages, safer workplace standards, women were — as a function of their isolation — left without bargaining power to see their work valued. Instead, an extensive number of strategies has been set up to normalize their position and, most importantly, to showcase housework. These are naturalistic discourses around women's intrinsic inclinations to housework,<sup>(9)</sup> and superficially empowering such as entrusting them to take over the decoration of the home — this task of artifice, lower in rank after architecture, reserved to men.<sup>(10)</sup> And just as women were expected to take psychological comfort in their role, so arose the need for a distinctly material comfort to fill the void left by inconsistent compensation.

This void, of course, was one that capitalism was all too eager to fill. An accumulation of objects followed post-war incentives to mass consumption. In «Domesticity at War»,<sup>(11)</sup> Beatriz Colomina points out the aggressive flow of commercial imagery that staged domesticity as a central value in the 1950s: «ads which do not try to sell you the product except as a natural accessory of a way of life.»<sup>(12)</sup> In the martial strategies of consumerism, domestic appliances have been most often advertised for their supposed amenity. A look across the household section of any electronics store is full of words suggesting comfort, silence, speed, obscuring the fact that their operation entails work — housework, that is — most often performed by women. Just like the latest beauty routine accessories, the «right» to decorate a home, or even the pill, women are told that they are not missing out on anything as long as they keep throwing (their husband's) money at the problem. As defined by French sociologist Claudette Sèze in the introduction of «Confort moderne: une nouvelle culture du bien être», «Contemporary comfort is based on the arrangement of a multitude of material objects. In its «concreteness», comfort is indeed an assembly, a collection, characteristics that create this apparent paradox: it is the possession of a multitude of standardised industrial objects that makes the creation of personalised interiors possible today.»<sup>(13)</sup> Lest we forget, in the Middle Ages, comfort etymologically meant that which gives strength, support, and consolation, not a luxurious environment. Today, at least in English and French, solace and material well-being are conflated in a single word.

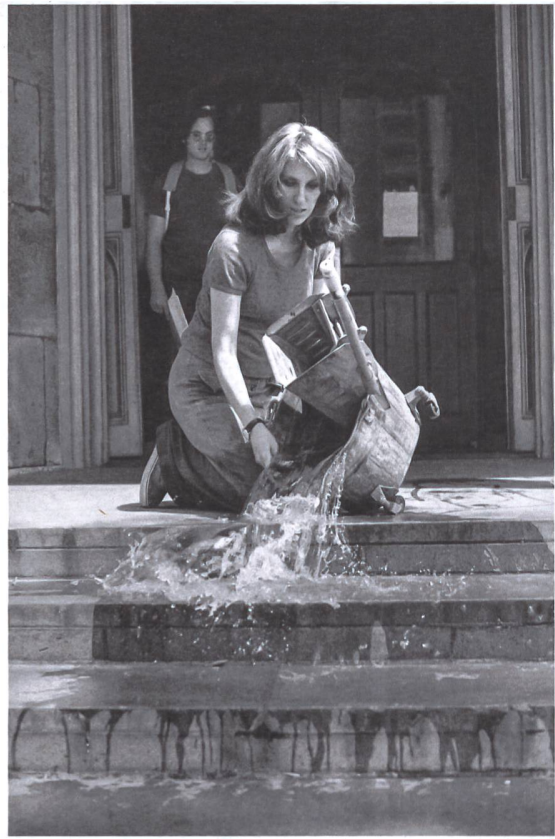
Domestic comfort is the discretionary reward for housework, the dull sedative for a fracture deep within. But being discretionary, it leaves those who receive it with no actual power over their remuneration, serving only to distract from the fact that «cooking, smiling, fucking,»<sup>(14)</sup> childbearing, cleaning, and driving kids to soccer practice is work. In a majority of households around the world, Mr. Clean

is just about the only man helping with domestic work. No wonder why, in 1969, American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles decided to make these tasks the very subject of her artistic practice: «I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother (random order). I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, et cetera. Also, (up to now separately) I «do» Art. Now, I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them as Art [...] My working will be the work.»<sup>(15)</sup> Publicly cleaning the steps of a museum as a performance, Laderman Ukeles revealed how the notion of comfort produced behind the walls of the home crumbles once the enclosure is removed.

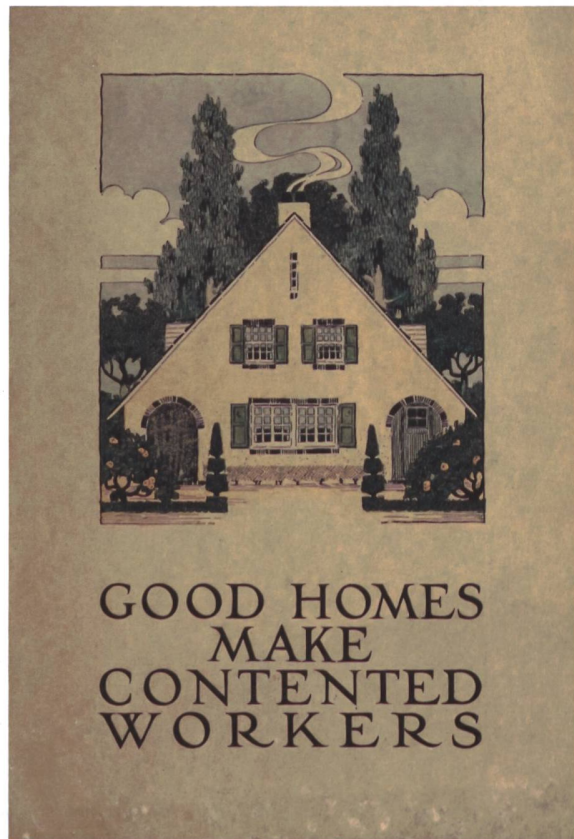
Feminist movements since the 1970s have argued against women's personal sacrifice of making a house comfortable for their husband and children without any reward but the possession of up-to-date housework tools and an interior design magazine subscription. Obviously, capitalist accumulation leads to inequalities between women who can pay for someone to help — often «thanks» to their dependency on their male partners — and marginalized women who can't. With the growing emancipation through salaried work, when the alternative is having a cleaner instead of being a cleaner, women who can afford it tend to choose the first option. But if society is inclined to pay other people to clean one's own dirt or care for the elder and disabled, albeit with ridiculously small sums reflecting the disdain for those performing those tasks, why has this monetary value given to housework never been granted to all women working that shift? Let's remember that in 1973 in the United Kingdom, cleaning was seen as so incredibly traumatizing and dissuasive that male criminal defendants were sometimes sentenced to do housework. A reporter at the time remarked that thousands of women across the country seemed to be subjected to the same punishment with increasing difficulty recalling the offense for which they were doing time.<sup>(16)</sup> The utopian idea of remunerating housework has been simultaneously imagined by worldwide second wave feminist movements in the 1970s, whose thoughts have been embodied in Silvia Federici's manifesto «Wages Against Housework».<sup>(17)</sup> Not only would this money compensate for financial inequalities due to hitherto unpaid housework, but also release women from the social pressure of economic dependency. Most importantly, it would give everyone, including men, the same incentives to do these chores, maybe even leading to spaces designed to reflect, not conceal, the reproductive work performed inside of them.

It could seem like the solution would simply be for women to free themselves of the concept of marital domesticity and the physicality of their homes in order to live their life unbothered. In fact, some feminist scholars have argued that the romanticized image of the home itself should be rejected as dangerously patriarchal, arguing that the whole concept relies on practices of encircling, enclosing, and gatekeeping inside and out, reflecting typically male patterns of dominance.<sup>(18)</sup> The abolition of home as a valued space of privacy defined by male territoriality might lead towards a form of more «communistic housekeeping», as Friedrich





(fig. a) Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside*, 1973, Part of *Maintenance Art* performance series, 1973–1974, Performance at Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT. Image: Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, NY



(fig. b) Book cover of «Good homes make contented workers», Industrial housing associates, 1918. Image: The Biddle Press, Philadelphia

Engels envisioned, in which the traditionally female, (meaning caretaking) roles would finally commandeer the spaces they labour in.<sup>(19)</sup>

Yet, focusing only on the ontology of the home seems short-sighted when the problem reaches much further. A woman stepping beyond her doorstep is already in hostile territory organised in such a way that «home» instead seems like the lesser of two evils. In «Feminist City»,<sup>(20)</sup> Canadian geographer and scholar Leslie Kern analyses how the public sphere is essentially made to dissuade women from participating in public life — and we're not even talking about sexual harassment. While the individual deserted road, absent restroom, or broken street lamp might not have been designed specifically with the intent to discriminate against women, the accumulation of sexist design decisions and, even worse, the staggering lack of supportive infrastructure, form a critical mass that is, if not intentionally, at least systemically othering women in public space.<sup>(21)</sup>

That the city is «patriarchy written in stone,»<sup>(22)</sup> as Jane Darke observed, becomes obvious when looking at planning priorities. Data from Western countries bothering to report on housing issues related to women is extremely scarce. Switzerland somehow seems to have exact data on the percentage of migrants living in subsidized housing for every canton, but no persistent metric for the share of women.<sup>(23)</sup> The available data from a handful of places in the Global North show a stunning majority of public housing benefits claimants today are female, ranging from 55% in the canton Basel-Stadt to an estimated seventy-five percent in the U.S.; not surprising considering the demonstrably lower wages and higher risk of poverty.<sup>(24)</sup> This situation accompanies the threat of female homelessness fueled by a growing lack of support facilities like women's shelters, currently worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>(25)</sup> Somehow, it is hardly ever discussed that a housing crisis will therefore always claim a higher toll on women, and that an investment in affordable housing would mean a significant improvement in women's safety. A precarious housing market in these countries means that women will almost inevitably «stay in their place,» even if that place is an abusive relationship or a poverty-stricken neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city.

When women dare to venture out of their protective cocoons into the public space, their comfort only serves as a proxy for the policing of bodies and minds. For it is not the actual comfort of women that led multiple states in the U.S. — egged on by conservative religious groups, including many prominent women — to try to force trans folks to use public restrooms according to their assigned biological sex out of a supposed fear of «fake» trans women harassing «real» women. Transparently, the motivation was to enforce gender norms and segregate the stereotypically female from the rest.<sup>(26)</sup> To this day, baby changing facilities and wheelchair-accessible restrooms are almost inevitably regrouped with women's bathrooms, an enclave of the vulnerable. Some public transport systems around the world come to mind, which provide separate carriages only for women

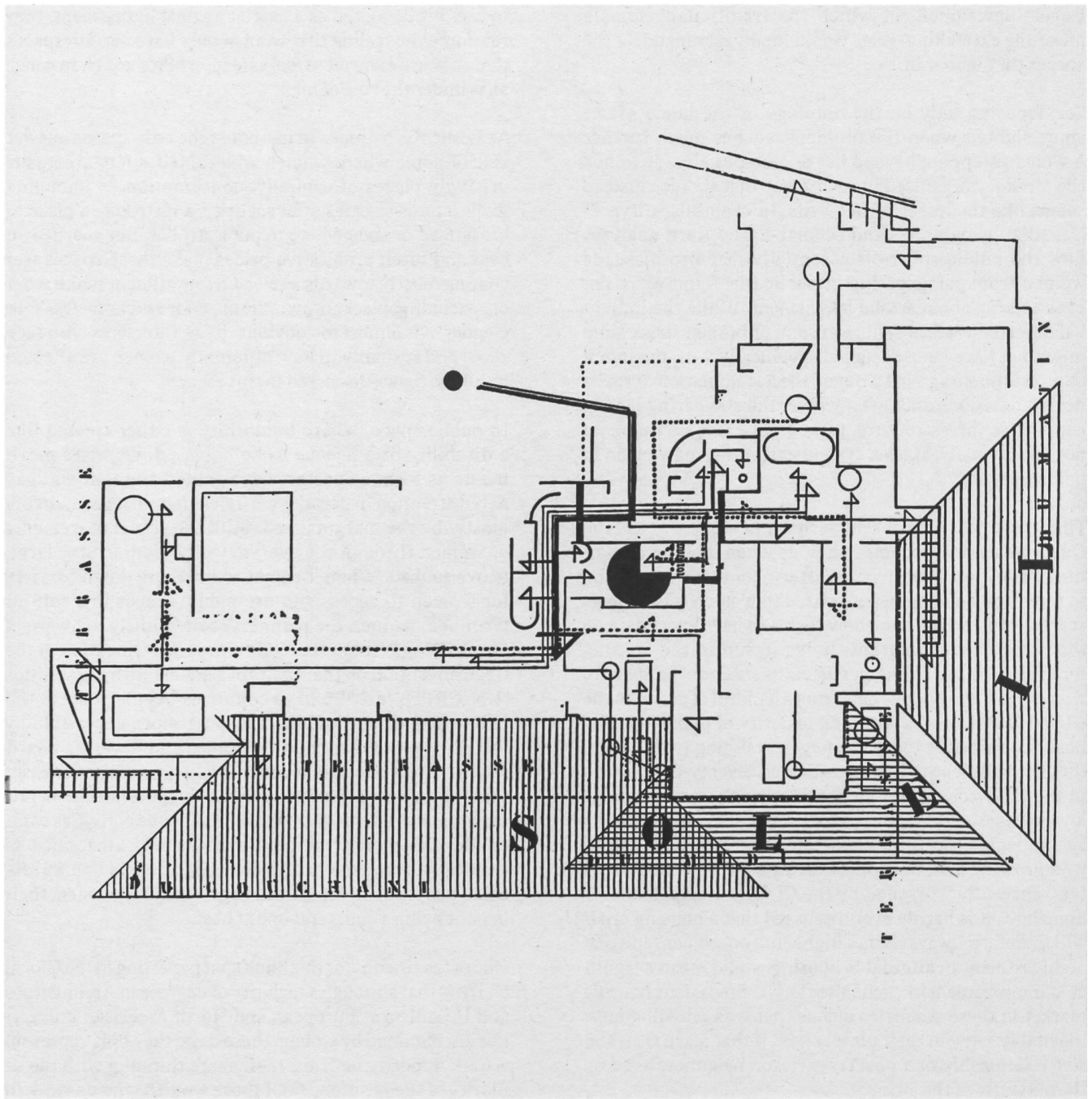
to use. While touted as a barrier against harassment, they reinforce the feeling that women only have certain spaces that they are allowed to feel safe in, while the city, in general, is under the rule of men.

As Leslie Kern argues in her book, the only spaces left outside of home where women are granted safety are unsurprisingly places of capitalist consumption.<sup>(27)</sup> Shopping malls, stores or cafés offer security, a restroom, a place to breastfeed or somewhere to put a stroller. But guarded access and often prohibitive prices make these spaces welcoming mostly towards a selected few affluent white women, excluding black, brown, trans, poor and homeless folk. Gender, it is almost too obvious to say, intersects with race, class, and sexuality in how differently women are affected by all the issues discussed in this essay.

In public space, where femininity is either treated like a disability or a licence to be harassed, women's movements as form of protest have gained traction and garnered attention in decades of tireless feminist groundwork mostly by the marginalized. Still, the actual movements of women through the everyday city seem to stay largely overlooked. When it comes to breaking down barriers for women to access and use public spaces in a self-determined manner, the planners seem blithely unaware of the challenges they face. Only since the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN-CRPD) in 2006 have countries begun to make the public spaces and public transport more accessible by installing elevators, building ramps, and lowering boardwalks.<sup>(28)</sup> Not once did it occur that women face the exact same obstacles in their daily lives — juggling strollers, groceries, and relatives with disabilities (three activities women do much more than men), perhaps even all at once.<sup>(29)</sup> Ironically, the issue had to be recognized as one for disabled people before it started to get fixed for women, their benefit being a collateral one at best.

One of the reasons for this blind spot persisting in the Global North is that although a majority of degrees in Architecture and Urbanism at European and North American universities are obtained by women these days, they only represent a stark minority in firms, their share thinning with the seniority of the position.<sup>(30)</sup> Of those women who do work in planning, three quarters do not have children. Only one in every twenty professors at German architecture faculties is not male. How, indeed, can a profession so unrepresentative of society at large be aware of and prioritize the obstacles women face in the city every day?<sup>(31)</sup>

The spatial solutions might lie beyond existing structures: asking male-dominated fields to correctly map out the security threats to women leads to such shockingly disappointing but totally unsurprising reports as the one showing that a fifth of claims of sexual assault in Canada are being dismissed as unfounded by police before a prosecutor can even look at them, making the geographical assessment of safety threats to women utterly worthless.<sup>(32)</sup> Instead, trusting those navigating the public space to map out their comfort zones and collaborate on solutions can be a pretty



(fig. c) The movements inscribed in the drawing replace most walls, partitions, and openings. The focus on the notation of operational flows instead of enclosing elements explicits the codification of space in terms not only of the bodies that occupy it, but also of those who work in it. Eileen Gray, Diagrammatic floor plan for Villa E-1027 in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France, 1926—1929. Image: published in «L'Architecture vivante», 1929.



simple but effective way of addressing actual problems. In New Delhi for example, where the record on female safety and male accountability is particularly dire, the decentrally sourced smartphone app SafetiPin lets women rate streets and public transport according to visibility, lighting, potentially hazardous groups of men, and other dangers in real time, creating a much more accurate picture of how the city can work on improving safety and comfort — which it subsequently did.<sup>(33)</sup> And in Kigali, Rwanda, authorities installed mini-markets with spots for breastfeeding to make vending safer for women and support female cooperatives.<sup>(34)</sup> It seems indeed futile to pursue female comfort as the accrued material unbotheredness of a select few when the most basic needs of the many are not even met.

In Poland, women have recently taken over the public sphere. They went on strike as «tired angry housewives»<sup>(35)</sup> after the government drastically restricted their abortion rights. If one of their slogans was: «may you, asshole, step on a piece of Lego with your bare foot», repressive politicians have been more troubled by the massive takeover of the streets by women, together with LGBTQI+ and refugee communities: «The Angry, Tired Housewives organise countercultures and with them, counterpublics. In media, meetings, organizations, squats, theaters, student groups and other forms, we unite to offer our critique and alternatives to the abusive, patriarchal rule. We transform the public sphere with our protests, our critique, our art and our resistance. In our diversity, we often seem like a hybrid.»<sup>(36)</sup>

Perhaps the spatial transformations necessary to reimagine domestic and public comfort will need the same sort of hybrid approach. Blurring the lines of well defined space occupations and affectations might help to challenge women's fake right to material luxury. After all, they don't ask for much: «a woman must have money and a room of her own (if she is to write fiction),»<sup>(37)</sup> wrote Virginia Woolf about a century ago in her acclaimed novel that fostered poetic potentialities of creativity, freedom, pleasure and individual fulfillment. Around the same time, some modernist architects already proposed a new functionalism of domestic spaces, but these designs remained ones for the books, most likely because the women who took part in their ideation were always second-in-rank to a man. The Schröder House by Gerrit Rietveld was designed together with the owner, a widow with three kids, and has been considered a feminist architectural manifesto of *De Stijl*; innovative for their very open and modular interior organisation and their openings at the corners towards the outside, the spaces communicate and visually overlap, making the different activities visible instead of hiding them.<sup>(38)</sup> Eileen Gray's Villa E-1027 in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin rethought the traditional family house by conceiving a flexible life space, autonomous bedrooms and integrated practical furniture. In opening up spaces, she attempted to subtract the separate role of the housewife.<sup>(39)</sup> Women's studies professor Jasmine Rault argues that Gray helped design a lesbian modernity which depended on staying in rather than coming out.<sup>(40)</sup> She sensibly participated in an early queering of space, «breaking up the clarity of communication, designing sensually rich spaces for visual and physical privacy, generat[ing] possibil-

ities for bodies and pleasure».<sup>(41)</sup> As Rault sees it, Gray tried to change things from the inside, rather than breaking out in public like feminist movements were prone to.

Contemporary feminist architecture movements also take cues from past forms of living to inform their designs that reflect a woman's comfort. Belgian architect and researcher Apolline Vranken, founder of the collective «L'architecture qui dégenre» (An Architecture that Un-Genders), offers feminist city tours of Brussels focusing on beguine convents. As women-only secular communities, these social microcosms promoted values of solidarity, sorority and autonomy throughout Flanders in the Middle Ages. More recent community living projects, such as the *Frauen-Werk-Stadt I and II* in Vienna are directly inspired from these beguinages.<sup>(42)</sup> The two districts are the first European urban experiments of residential development for women only, imagined by designing private and public spaces in tandem. They integrate all kinds of social and economic infrastructure facilitating daily life, and the housing solutions offered include typologies that burst the normative model of the nuclear family: apartments for single women with or without kids, shared common rooms for elderly women, solutions for precarious families. The comfort offered to these women is personified and focuses on taking care of each other. In fact, we think that today, women claim more for care than comfort. Traditionally feminized, the separation of care work from «real work» has doomed women to be assigned to domestic space. If care — as caregiving and care receiving mirroring each other — were broadly taken into account in space design like the beguines or Austrian architects did, its intrinsic reciprocity would allow gendered divisions of labour to dissolve.<sup>(43)</sup> Studies show that men are more likely to overtake family duties if they are part of a public and larger frame than at home.<sup>(44)</sup> In that sense, a solution brought up by Eva Kail, the urban planner of *Frauen-Werk-Stadt*, is to set care as a collective responsibility through what she terms «gender sensitive planning»: bringing care duties out into public space.<sup>(45)</sup> Here, the hybridization of space happens through a hybridization of work.

Reshaping the meaning of home instead of dismantling it is also what American political theorist and socialist feminist Iris Marion Young advocates. Her seminal 1997 essay «House and Home: Variations on a Theme» looks towards the positive meanings embedded in domesticity. To her, safety, individuation, and privacy are basic needs only something we define as «home» can meet. But most importantly, it generates the space necessary for care work, or as she calls it: preservation. The rebuilding of the self, maintenance of the past through caring for the materials and objects related to one's history, and rituals of remembrance and conservation for future generations should be celebrated as the creative and undervalued work often performed by women. Young explicitly criticizes the futurity on which much of women's liberation has been theorized by the likes of Simone de Beauvoir, arguing that work concerning itself with maintenance of that which is already there should be valued as much as producing something new: «the particular human meanings enacted in the historicity of human



existence depend as much on the projection of a past as of a future.»<sup>(47)</sup> Instead of being a necessary but overlooked base to sustain productivity, the «cooking, smiling, fucking» itself becomes just as powerful a form of production.

*So get in your car, Bill. Drive the kids to school. Do the shopping. And you will see that the road leading there might be your least concern. Because the more time you spend on that road, the less time you spend thinking that other things have higher value.*