

ESSAYS

Towards a feminist definition of housing

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This attempt to define housing from a feminist perspective is the result of various research projects carried out with women in precarious housing situations in Europe. The first fieldwork began in 2010 with a community of Roma women in Bucharest threatened with eviction due to the communist transition. From this experience, my research began to make connections between housing and gender issues. From 2016 onwards, I conducted fieldwork, mainly in Brussels, on issues of women's housing rights. This definition is also based on the experience of co-founding, in 2018, the association Angela.D which promotes access to housing for women and favours the inclusion of a gender perspective in public housing policies in the Brussels Region. This essay is the result of a constant iterative work between fieldwork and research conducted within the Uses&Spaces laboratory (LAB-UCLouvain).

While on the one hand we can be heartened by the fact that contemporary scholarship in geography and urban planning is gradually integrating the gender approach into its analyses, on the other hand, the spatial scales most often used are those of infrastructures and public spaces. The domestic scale continues to be poorly studied, documented, and analysed from a gender perspective, both in scientific work¹ and in public housing programmes. The purpose of this essay is to describe how housing can be analysed through the prism of gender inequalities in order to enhance the inclusion of this domain in scientific work and in public policies. It also aims to highlight the way in which this spatial scale can be used as a lever to, on the one hand, rethink relations between men and women, and consider the specific needs of gender minorities, and on the other hand, the articulation between the public and domestic scales, by paying particular attention to intermediate spaces.

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Five facets of patriarchal housing

Housing in a patriarchal society has five facets. It is first understood as (1) *a space of relegation* (Oakley, 1980). Indeed, 'the majority of women withdrew from the economic sphere to confine themselves to their homes from the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth century onwards' (Dietrich-Ragon, Lambert, & Bonvalet, 2019). The industrial and capitalist city is conceived in a binary way, between public space, a domain reserved for men, and private space attributed to women (Federici, 2014). Research in France and the United States (Coutras, 1996; Massey, 1984), shows that the binary model resulting from capitalism and the industrial revolution persists in Western cities and is even reinforced by certain housing typologies such as pavilion housing, and by certain urban forms such as the *suburbs* in the United States (Hayden, 1980) and the peri-urban in France (Rougé, 2018). Indeed, the development of peripheries implies different consequences. First of all, the distance from the centres restricts the mobility of the inhabitants and isolates them from the service infrastructures and local sociability. Secondly, pavilion housing requires both financial and family stability. Access to home ownership for individual housing puts households in debt and restricts long-term choices. Thirdly, suburban housing offers larger living areas and therefore increases domestic work, which is unequally distributed. Despite these difficulties, throughout the twentieth century many Western states encouraged access to home ownership (through fiscal policies) and the development of individual housing and suburban areas (through urban policies).

Housing is also (2) *a social marker of gender inequalities*. Such inequalities affect two core issues, namely access to housing and housing conditions. The housing crisis hitting European cities, discriminates women particularly hard (Hayden, 1980; Bernard, 2007). In the domestic sphere, women often have more difficulty in securing their own space. The *room of one's own* claimed by Virginia Woolf is not acquired. Research conducted in the 1980s in Toronto showed that for a full-time working couple, when women occupy domestic space, they share space more often than their male counterparts (Ahrentzen, Levine, & Michelson, 1989). In the 1990s, research in the USA and Israel highlighted the fact that extra rooms within the home are often reserved for men (Altman & Churchman, 1994). Access to quality space is conditioned by marital status, the burden of dependents, economic conditions, negotiation skills, norms, and social representations of household members. Gender impacts each of these factors.

The media, consumer society, and conservative ideologies in the West convey a stereotypical image of 'the home' as a place of rest, leisure, tranquillity,

and security, where the nuclear family can grow harmoniously. This legacy is partly due to bourgeois thinking and the predominance of the male vision in the trades of architecture and urban planning. Today, despite the gradual professionalisation of women, androcentrism still prevails in spatial design (Vranken, 2018; Muxi Martinez, 2009). In the patriarchy, housing is (3) *a space of women's exploitation* (Delphy & Leonard, 2019). The work located in the dwelling and its surroundings, daily, invisible, repetitive, tedious, and unpaid, is called 'reproductive work' by Marxist feminists like Benson or Morton (Vogel, 2013). Contemporary time-use surveys show that women still do most of this work for free, as well as the conciliation with salaried jobs and the induced mental load.² The reconciliation is even more difficult to assume for poor women, particularly in single-parent families. Middle-class households often pay poorer, racialised women from immigrant backgrounds to perform reproductive work (Avril & Cartier, 2019).

The home is also the place of the (4) *first differentiated socialisation between girls and boys* (Lahire, 2001) where dichotomous gendered norms are internalised by children through mimicry. The layout of spaces, and in particular the functional differentiation within the dwelling, contributes to the 'recomposition of gendered identities and power relations between the sexes' (Dietrich-Ragon, Lambert, & Bonvalet, 2019).

As a space hidden from view, the home is (5) *a space of power and violence*. Indeed, the violence suffered by men and women encompasses intrinsically different realities. In Belgium, according to a 2010 survey, while men suffer more violence in the public space, and specifically at work on a sporadic basis, the violence endured by women is mainly located in the household, is perpetrated by someone close to them, and has a repetitive nature (Pieters, Italiano, Offermans, & Hellemans, 2010). McGrath reports that 'every thirty seconds a woman is beaten in the United States. Most of this violence is perpetrated in the kitchen and bedroom' (McGrath quoted by Hayden, 1980). The work of San Martin on the spatial dimension of domestic violence highlights the fact that 'domestic violence circulates and inscribes, in all spaces, the logic of domesticity'. In this case, the available space shrinks and contributes to the *deprise spatiale* of female partners (San Martin, 2019).

Recommendations: housing as a lever for feminist transformation

In order to consider housing as a spatial scale that can subvert the patriarchal order, it is important to consider it as a '*resource*' (Hancock, 2014) that supports the '*agency*' of its inhabitants. Feminist thinking since the 1970s

has highlighted the political significance of the private sphere through the slogan: *The private is political*. Indeed, it is within the domestic sphere that issues as crucial as reproductive rights, reconciliation of productive and reproductive work, or egalitarian parenthood are negotiated. For too long, these issues have been considered 'private'. As a result, public housing policies have reproduced unequal social norms and have taken little account of the needs of minorities.

The first recommendation concerns the location of housing to avoid the relegation of women. In the 1970-80s, in the US, Wekerle and Hayden considered the city to be the most suitable environment to 'support women's expanded roles and desire for fuller participation in the public life' (Hayden, 1980; Wekerle, 2006). The legacy of these visions can also be found in the contemporary work of feminist geographers in the US (Kern, 2021) and Europe (Faure, Hernández-González, & Luxembourg, 2017). Encouraging women's housing in the city means socialising it and removing it from property speculation.

The second recommendation concerns the intermediate scale. This scale concerns both the circulation spaces between the domestic and public spheres, but also common spaces. The quality, location, diversity, governance and quantity of intermediate spaces offered in and around housing, will play a role in people's sociability, in the possibility of sharing and making reproductive work visible, in the 'co-veillance' (Wekerlé & Querrien, 1999) of one's neighbourhood, and in breaking down the binarity between private and public. This attention to intermediate spaces is seen as a priority both in feminist scientific work and in concrete housing experiments carried out by and for women. In the scientific community, the work of San Martin in France highlights the importance of multiplying the spheres of sociability to prevent domestic violence (San Martin, 2019). Surveys in Belgium and Spain with women during Covid-19 have shown that access to spaces outside the domestic sphere has helped to free women from the feeling of confinement and the social roles imposed on them (Salembier, Bernard, Girardo, & Muxi Martinez, 2023). In terms of concrete contemporary applications, we can cite the experiments carried out in Brussels by Angela.D.³ This association proposes to create inhabitant communities sharing a series of common spaces within a collective housing complex to empower women and to pool care work. In Barcelona, the housing cooperative movement has experimented with models of governance and spatial arrangements such as collective kitchens where residents take turns to prepare meals, and laundry rooms located in qualitative intermediate spaces.⁴ More generally, the presence of intermediate spaces in and around the dwelling obliges one to 'govern the common' (Who occupies the space? How? How often? How are decisions made?) and to reintegrate politics into the domestic sphere.

This attempt to define feminist housing inaugurates, without essentialism, the potential of household spaces to support transformations within the home, which in turn will have repercussions for the urban and political spheres. But these reflections cannot avoid taking into consideration the interweaving of oppressions (sexism, ableism, ageism, racism, classism) of the intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989). Indeed, it is unthinkable to imagine that the emancipation of some (from domestic burdens, for example) would require the exploitation of others.

Notes

1. As an exception, we can cite some recent research: Chris Blache (2019), Anne Lambert (Lambert, Dietrich-Ragon, & Bonvalet, 2018), Joanne Le Bars (2018), Lidewij Tummers (2013) and Zaida Muxi Martinez (2009). In the late 1990s, Anglo-Saxon feminist geographers were also interested in the domestic sphere (Domosh, 1998).
2. On average in Europe and the USA: 2.3 hours/day – men and 4.1 hours/day – women for reproductive work: <https://gender-data-hub-2-undesade.hub.arcgis.com/pages/time-use>
3. <https://angela-d.be/fr/>
4. <http://www.laborda.coop/ca/>

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