

The House I'd Like to Have: Women's Spatial Cultures, Design, and Aesthetic in 20th Century Italy

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Abstract

"Has any woman ever designed architectures in the past centuries? You may ask her to design a hut, not even a temple! She can't. She is foreign to architecture." These infamous words of Benito Mussolini (1927) reflected the widespread sexism of the Fascist regime and prompted a silent wave of dissent pioneered by women intellectuals, architects, writers, and journalists in the early 20th century. They advocated for a valuable feminine contribution to Italian architecture and their story is still partially unknown by architectural historians today. This essay tackles Italian women's spatial design and aesthetics during the regime, a period in which they kept silently operating within the built environment as professional architects with unbuilt projects and as amateur designers inside their homes. These circumstances, as argued here, determined the emergence of a feminine and feminist approach to architectural design and criticism that transcended the male boundaries of high culture, reinforced by the Fascist regime and in line with the modernist binary understanding of taste and cultural architectural production. The latter is studied through the lens of cultural domesticity, a theoretical framework that merges cultural sociology, feminism, and architecture. By focusing on Italian women's lived experiences and unconventional design approaches, this study ultimately looks at the consolidation of feminine aesthetics and how it informed women's spatial design as it keeps challenging the boundaries of architectural history.

Keywords: domesticity, italy, feminine, aesthetics, design, interiors

Introduction

Western architectural history has been for too long gendered; this affected the criteria for value attribution to buildings and architects, directly impacting architectural design. This is true, especially at the domestic scale where the separate spheres paradigm—the infamous dichotomies 'private' and 'public,' 'feminine' and 'masculine'—still play a spatial role, framing power dynamics and the use of domestic spaces. Such binary understanding of sexuality and gender has, indeed, created an architectural and social space of patriarchal hegemonic order that historically led to gender-based discrimination and the psychological and material domestication of women (Wigley, 1992). Consequently, this text looks at the valuable contribution of overlooked pioneer women architects, along with their role in the design of domestic spaces through lived practices and experiences. It ultimately brings forward a cultural and gendered understanding of residential interiors—the forced locus of feminine creativity throughout the early 1900s—through a critique of the sexual, cultural, and spatial normativity of architectural history and practice.

This essay draws on feminist and sociological theory to propose new interpretative lenses that place issues of gender, culture, and everyday life at the centre of architectural research. Placing the formation and consolidation of gender identity at the core of this investigation means delving into individual, personal, and even intimate facets of living, which are largely overlooked in architectural history and practice. This essay tackles this gap and positions itself within existing interdisciplinary literature that explores issues of gender and architecture concerning "production, but also to reproduction through representation, consumption, appropriation, and occupation" (Rendell, 2012, p. 90). It ultimately aims to contribute to the emerging body of work on new architectural histories that challenge the white male canon and concentrate on the women's overlooked architectural and cultural production. It does so by focusing on the cultural, aesthetic, and above all, architectural design potential of everyday occupation from the standpoint of Italian women amateur designers and decorators and women architects whose value has not been properly acknowledged.

From this study, a clear disconnection emerges between masculine ideological schemes and structures—materialised in the architectural plans of realised and unrealised housing projects—and feminine cultures and inhabitation practices, which take place in the home. This tension is particularly evident in residential estates implemented in Italy before and after the Second World War.

The Value of Feminine Domesticity

"Within the context of feminine domesticity stereotypical images of women and the home were conflated and turned into a single ideal. In response to that ideal, women have formed their individual and collective identities" (Sparke, 1995/2010, pp. XXIV–XXV). Feminine domesticity is socially and culturally produced and individually negotiated. However, it is also closely tied to architectural space, which brings together the main disciplines that frame this study and its theoretical field of research: social, feminist, and cultural theory along with architecture. It is acknowledged that both material and spatial cultures play a central role in the formation and reproduction of enculturated practices and gender identities—especially female subjectivities—providing the basis upon which women's spatial design and practices have emerged.

Concerning this point, Wigley (1992) writes that "the wife learns her 'natural' place by learning the place of things. She is 'domesticated' by internalising the very spatial order that confines her" (p. 340). This internalisation and negotiation are mediated by both architectural space and household objects. Their consumption is historically associated with the construction of feminine domesticity through the exercise of taste via interior decoration and furnishing.¹ Women's self-making practices in the home are indeed nuanced and their spatial manifestations have been only insufficiently explored so far. 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, but also aesthetic choices.

Architectural historians played a central role in the exclusion of several aspects of female aesthetic and cultural production, including domestic interiors, their occupation, decoration and furnishing, as well as the implications they have for self-making practices. Attfield indeed, claims that design historians' "disinterest [in middle-class houses, furnishings, and objects] can also be attributed to a perceived lack of quality ('poor taste') ascribed to the suburban aesthetic within the context of visual culture, often disparagingly referred to as 'kitsch'" (Attfield, 1989, p. 199).² Sparke (1995/2010) adds that:

¹ See, for instance, the work of Mary Douglas (1982), Penny Sparke (1995/2010), Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham (1989).

² It is necessary to point out that the term *kitsch* is not seen as having negative connotations here. *Kitsch* is, indeed, considered the aesthetic culture of the capitalist bourgeoisie, starting from the 18th century, as described by Norbert Elias in his essay *Kitsch Style and the Age of Kitsch* (1935/1998). It does not have pejorative connotations, as opposed to when the term is used by cultural critics and design historians, who see it as the epitome of bad taste.

the masculine experience of modernity dominated and eclipsed its feminine equivalent, rendering the latter marginal and trivial. Taste, not surprisingly, was relegated to the feminine sphere, where it became the primary means through which women negotiated that private, alternative face of modernity that touched and transformed their lives. (p. XXI)

Taste reformers' harsh criticism against the feminine middle-class world and aesthetics in the 20th-century home sanctioned, indeed, the break of high-culture masculine, modernist aesthetics over mid-culture, and feminine taste. It was arguably the result of legitimising male, hetero-patriarchal, and elitist privilege in the creative fields—architecture included (Heynen, 2012). No wonder that women's spatial and aesthetic choices have been overlooked so far and that women have been systematically excluded from the dominant aesthetic culture. This privilege has been justified as an aesthetic judgement, whose criteria are defined precisely by the elite of male, white men that enforced distinction and defined the boundaries of high culture (Fowler & Wilson, 2004; Heynen, 2012). Female taste, creative endeavours, consumption choices, and it is argued here, 'feminine spaces'—like the domestic interior—have been the central subjects of this systematic exclusion, neglect, and contempt. By challenging these dynamics from a feminist perspective, this essay places all these excluded categories at the core of its investigation. It ultimately aims to reposition female aesthetics, cultural practices, and spaces at the centre of architectural history, theory, and practice.

The attribution of value to people and use (or to inhabitants and the appropriation of their domestic interiors) is in contrast to high-cultural discussions of aesthetics. *Use-value* is also the lens that Marxist feminists use to dissociate cultural artefacts from exchange and symbolic value, which until now, have respectively legitimised capitalist transactions, the patriarchy, and it is believed here, equally legitimised exclusive choices and exclusionary narratives by art, design, and architectural historians (Attfield, 1989). This study hence fully embraces the aesthetic and design potential of women's inhabitation practices and spatial cultures and overall, women's cultural production in the domestic realm. These aspects will be referred to as *cultural domesticity*, forming an innovative theoretical and analytical lens grounding the study of residential architecture and domesticity. Specifically, *cultural domesticity* describes the cultural, embodied, and spatial production that takes place inside the home. Given women's traditional connection to domestic space as both an enforced confinement and the space for the negotiation and consolidation of female identity, given the current theoretical gap

in architectural history concerning women's cultural and aesthetic production in the domestic environment, the discussion of *cultural domesticity* almost exclusively relates to women's identity and lived experience (Pilkey et al., 2017).

The implications of cultural domesticity and the contributions this essay attempts to make are threefold. First, it acknowledges the cultural and spatial relevance of human actions and individual occupation of architectural spaces while elevating women's homemaking and inhabitation practices and arguing that they are culturally and aesthetically valuable. Second, it criticises architectural history's traditional aesthetic values that have so far pushed *kitsch* domestic interiors and ordinary ('feminine') housing to the margins of the architectural debate. Third, it brings forth a unitary feminist theoretical framework for studying the occupation and design of domestic interiors, which includes daily spatial changes and minor alterations that are considered worthy of further research. These points can be narrowed down to a single epistemological shift influenced by feminism and cultural studies by challenging the sexist boundaries of high culture in the creative fields, specifically architectural history; cultural domesticity repositions feminine culture (usually considered 'middlebrow' or included in the larger umbrella of midcult) at the centre of an architectural inquiry.³ In particular, the study of women's contribution to architecture through the notion of cultural domesticity is an attempt to subvert existing hierarchies of value attribution in architectural history, placing feminine spaces and cultures at the centre of its investigation.

Women's Conservatism in Modern Design

The culture of reconstruction

The project of construction of a collective, national identity in Italy intertwines with the consolidation of personal and gender identities, impacting women's lives and the use and distribution of dwellings' spaces. The patriarchal and spatial system that has been trapping women inside stereotypical, sexist, and backward roles is particularly evident in Italy and has been tackled in previous studies

³ Some may argue that this approach aligns with postmodern theory, which is partially true, given the widely acknowledged connection between feminist theory and Postmodernism. However, Sparke (1995/2010) argues that even though it is believed that Postmodernism overcame the differences between high and low/pop culture, this was, unfortunately, only an illusion. High-culture manifestations of Postmodernism emerged in the visual and creative fields, reproducing the same mechanisms of distinction and exclusion that had previously pushed women's culture and experience to the margins (Sparke, 1995/2010).

(Forlini, 2021). Nevertheless, it is precisely through women's subtle reworking of traditional models and spaces that they have been able to express themselves. The neo-traditionalist turn that Italian politics has recently taken is a manifestation of a slow process of the consolidation of traditional gender and family relations across Italian society and it directly impacted domesticity and the design of middle-class dwellings (Cooper, 2017).⁴ Italian architecture, specifically the design of the Italian home, had an involutinal, regressive path rather than a more-or-less 'positive evolution,' meaning that it facilitated the return to traditional models rather than reflecting the social change that affected Western countries in the 20th century (Forlini, 2021).

Italian women have unfortunately paid the cost of Italy's social involution, as most of them have not been able to break away from their traditional domestic role. Despite their entry into the workforce over the past decades, they are still expected to take care of the house, so they have been forced to have a 'double presence' in the workplace and the home (Balbo, 1978). Therefore, Italian women had no other choice than to rework traditional roles, spaces, and practices to reaffirm themselves and their individuality. These dynamics led to numerous tensions within the family unit that are also the outcome of an imposed, fictitious cultural narrative that reinforced patriarchal systems of oppression that materialised in the architectural space of the home.

The materialisation of hetero-patriarchal structures and stereotypical culture is indeed clear and strong in Italy. For instance, etiquette manuals in "post-unification Italy have as a noble objective the identification-construction of the national character of what is Italian, the Italian woman, the ideal model of an Italian family" (Melograni, 1988, p. 263). The emphasis of Italian biopolitics is not solely on the discipline of individual bodies but mainly on the construction of a national character based on strong gender hierarchies and the cornerstone of Italian identity: the Catholic, nuclear family. This process of national and cultural unification took place through the consolidation of Italian culture and the homogenisation of social classes towards the model of the renowned *Italiano medio* [average or middle-class Italian], a process that started with the unification of the peninsula and found its apex during the Fascist regime (Forlini, 2021). Twentieth-century middle-class Italians were characterised by:

⁴ The rise of neo-traditionalism in Italy is exemplified by the recent rise of neo-conservative parties led by politicians Matteo Salvini and the current prime minister Giorgia Meloni.

la straordinaria omogeneità e rigidità dei comportamenti nella organizzazione delle scansioni della giornata quotidiana: non soltanto ci si svegliava e si andava a dormire più o meno tutti all'unisono, ma anche nel corso dell'anno ciascuno conduceva una vita sempre uguale a se stessa, con giornate organizzate sino all'ultimo minuto nello stesso identico modo.

[extraordinary homogeneity and rigidity of behaviour in the organisation and tasks of the day: not only did they wake up and go to sleep more or less all in unison, but also each led a life that was always the same during the year, with every minute of the day organised in the exact same way]. (Asquer, 2011, p. 86)

Indeed, Italy's national standardisation along with mass homologation—that overcame, respectively, class boundaries—favoured the standardisation of inhabitation cultures (Salvati, 1993, p. 21). This led to the standardisation of domestic and family cultures and at the same time, of domestic spaces, which led to little or no changes inside domestic interiors, hence the peculiarity of the Italian context.

The reasons underlying the resistance of the traditional nuclear family over the centuries should be ascribed to the mechanisms of parental transmission of values and lifestyles and the cycles of restoration and legitimisation of the traditional Catholic family by the state. In fact, it was the Fascist regime that first restored them by strengthening the patriarchy and extinguishing the enthusiasm of young Futurist women, the first feminists, and the women who entered the labour market during the interwar period.⁵ The Fascist government was responsible for the birth and consolidation of the ideology of the housewife, or *massaia*, in charge of the care and growth of the white, heterosexual, Catholic family. Furthermore, the post-war government was led for over forty years by the centrist party *Democrazia Cristiana* [Christian Democracy] (1943–1994), which promoted a "pervasive paternalist and familyist rhetoric," defined as "pastoral Catholic" (Asquer, 2011, p. 127).

This widespread 'culture of reconstruction' affected not only the physical aspect of Italian cities—which were rebuilt after the bombings of the Second World War—but also the private, domestic

⁵ Some Italian women Futurists include poet Emma Marpelliero, painters Olga Biglieri, Leandra Angelucci Cominazzini, Bice Lizzari, sculptor Regina Cassolo, and many other overlooked talented artists.

sphere. In fact, the generation of young couples that settled during the economic boom preferred to take refuge in traditional family values, the Church, and authority in general. It was especially men who reinforced these dynamics as a reaction to the large-scale entry of women into the job market and they did so by returning to strong normative and moralistic beliefs (Asquer, 2011, pp. 127–129). In fact, throughout the 1970s, the embodiment of the full-time housewife was still the most widespread and preferred model, both on an ethical and regulatory level (Asquer, 2011, pp. 132–135). The preservation of gender privilege has therefore played a fundamental role in domestic and social realms (Barazzetti, 2006), slowing down, and perhaps even stopping the wave of modernity that influenced other countries' domestic interiors more decisively.

Women's design contribution

The Modern Movement in architecture began to take hold and spread throughout Europe between the 1920s and 1930s and played a fundamental role in post-war residential design. In Italy, however, this process was filtered by the Fascist regime, which starting with its rise to power in the 1922, embraced this new architectural movement but at the same time insisted on the restoration of traditional family models. Italian modernist architects had to mediate between the reformist impulse brought by Modernism and the authoritarian and reactionary proclamations of the regime.⁶ This resulted in contrasting architectural and distributive solutions and a never-completed modernisation of Italian society (Forlini, 2021).

During the decades of Fascist rule, the topic of interior furnishings started to play a major role, as the government replaced artisanal production in an attempt to strengthen the countries' industrialisation. Within that period, Italy saw the first attempts to rationalise the domestic plan, in line with other European countries. In 1927, local competition for the design of affordable domestic furniture was announced by the *Opera Nazionale del Dopolavoro* (Institutional body of the regime aimed at the planning of workers' leisure activities). The competition aimed at modernising Italian taste in domestic furnishing by overcoming regional and traditional models still popular across the peninsula, while stimulating Italian industrial production of furniture for the working class (Casciato, 1988, p. 582).

⁶ Few highly refined housing projects that reflected Rationalist aesthetics—such as those built by architects Giuseppe Terragni, Giuseppe Pagano, and Edoardo Persico—were countered by several standardised mass housing projects.

Furthermore, it was believed that furnishing and domestic objects would have simultaneously supported family stability through the strengthening of a "cult of the house" and favoured the expression of individual personality (Casciato, 1988, p. 583). This approach exemplifies the profound inconsistencies in the Fascist social and cultural reform: the momentum towards modernisation was countered by regressive social policies. This process was aimed at the construction of new consumers, the start of a national market of interior furniture, and the consolidation of a 'typically Italian furniture style': simple and humble. Architectural historian Maristella Casciato, however, summarises the failure of this project:

Umiltà di difficile accettazione proprio da quelle classi meno agiate cui tale tipo di arredamento era proposto; ma in generale semplificazione mal accetta a tutte le classi, a tal punto da costituire una vera e propria costante trans-classista: negli anni Trenta la casa italiana, pur trasformandosi, non perse di vista quel riferimento costante alla casa alto borghese che costituisce, nelle differenziazioni delle volgarizzazioni diverse, l'imperituro modello per eccellenza del modo di abitare della famiglia italiana. Così quella semplificazione formale e semantica dei pezzi di arredamento, che peraltro ebbe luogo in gran parte dei paesi d'Europa, e produsse in Italia oggetti dal design raffinato, ma dalla limitata circolazione, trovò forti resistenze, nel nascente mercato, sino a costituire la disperazione di schiere di architetti razionalisti.

[This humility was difficult to accept precisely by those less well-off classes to whom this type of furniture was proposed; but in general, this simplification was ill-accepted by all classes, to the point of constituting a real transclassist constant: in the Thirties the Italian house, while transforming itself, did not lose sight of that constant reference to the wealthy house that constitutes, in the differentiation of the various vulgarisations, the imperishable model par excellence of the way of living of the Italian family. Thus, that formal and semantic simplification of pieces of furniture, which also took place in most countries across Europe—and produced in Italy objects with a refined design, but with limited circulation—found strong resistance in the nascent market, to the point of causing despair of legions of rationalist architects]. (Casciato, 1988, p. 583)

What Casciato (1988) did not take into consideration in her analysis is the gender dialectic embedded in this discourse and specifically, the role that women, the first Italian consumers played in this context—the few durable objects purchased referred to the wealthy home aesthetic model as they rejected simple, modernist forms. Domestic consumption here contributed to the definition of their class and gender identity. The few spatial alterations of Italian dwellings can be included in the overall engagement of Italian women in the design of domestic interiors. Both amateur decorators and professional designers started engaging in the design of new spatial models. The first women architects and interior designers—the two disciplines are usually merged in Italy⁷—started proposing dwelling units and housing models that have been overlooked in architectural history (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Some of them mediated between the bourgeois and popular pull of Italian culture, with a peculiar interpretation of the modernist style (Figure 2). As lucidly pointed out by Cosseta (2000), Italian writers, and journalists like Irene Brin and Lidia Morelli translated into words their dissatisfaction with the proposed (masculine) models imagining their ideal solutions (Figure 2). In short, Italian women took clear and strong positions towards architecture and domesticity, proposing interior design, decorative, and spatial solutions that contribute to the definition of Italian cultural domesticity.

Here is a glimpse of their argument, clearly summarised by Morelli (1933, as cited in Cosseta, 2000):

Non vogliamo saperne della casa inospitale che sembra una clinica o un negozio, non vogliamo saperne della casa-macchina perché noi non siamo macchine; nemmeno possiamo sopportare a lungo una casa che sia un continuo grido polemico, sia un teorema o una trovata di spirito. La nostra casa deve potere accoglierci anche quando siamo addolorati. La casa umanizzata ci conviene meglio; deve aderire alla nostra vita, convenire col nostro spirito, appartenere a una società di uomini liberi e a un tempo rispondere a numerose e tacite esigenze di gusto che la nostra cultura e storia hanno impresso a noi, non meno vive delle esigenze pratiche e vitalistiche. L'architettura moderna dovrà essere nazionale, provinciale, individuale.

⁷ In general terms, interior architecture and design in Italy is called *architettura degli interni* (which literally translates to 'architecture of the interiors') and is part and parcel of architectural education. Different regional approaches might be adopted in the peninsula.

[We don't want to know about the inhospitable house that looks like a clinic or a shop, we don't want to know about the house-machine because we are not machines; not even we can endure for long a house that is a continuous polemic cry, be it a theorem or a gimmick of the spirit. Our home must be able to welcome us even when we are grieved. The humanised home suits us better; it must adhere to our life, agree with our spirit, belong to a society of free people, and at the same time respond to numerous and tacit taste needs that our culture and history have impressed on us, no less alive than practical and vitalist needs. Modern architecture must be national, provincial, and individual]. (p. 16)



Figure 1
Exterior of *Casa del Dopolavorista*,
Luisa Lovarini (1930)
(Photograph by
Girolamo Bombelli,
© Triennale Milano–
Archivi)

This quote exemplifies the humanistic and personal approach of feminine design in Italy, with its strong anchorage to culture and history. The "conservative components of feminine culture" in the inter- and post-war period were clearly identified by Sparke (1995/2010), who used the term "conservative modernism" (pp. 98–99) to describe women's aesthetic response to the dominant, high-cultural progressive (and male-dominated) architectural modernism. This peculiar approach was "embedded as an ideal across class lines in interwar society. And the particular model of domesticity it resembled was that of Victorian society nearly a century earlier" (Sparke, 1995/2010, p. 98). This clearly applies to Italy and women like Morelli (1933), who negotiated their own modern identities by reworking traditional aesthetics, typically associated with feminine

taste, and therefore, excluded by high-cultural and artistic production. While many Italian male architects of the time brought forward progressive agendas, embracing experimentation on the minimal, eclectic, and technological house—enjoying moderate success among the upper-middle classes in the Northern regions—the first female architects, and later on, the architects and engineers involved in Italy's reconstruction, created hybrid housing typologies more in line with societal expectations of the time. Research demonstrates that Italian women were very critical of the minimal house, this was mainly due to their lived experience inside the home as living in such small spaces generated a sense of physical and psychological constraint (Cosseta, 2000, p. 62).



Figure 2
 Interiors of *Casa
 del Dopolavorista*,
 Luisa Lovarini (1930)
 (Photograph by Girolamo
 Bombelli, © Triennale
 Milano–Archivi)

Three unrealised projects clearly illustrate what has been discussed so far, that is *Casa per un Quartierino Moderno* [House of a Modern District] of the 1920s, published in the *Almanac of the Italian Woman* of 1921 (Figure 3), *The House I'd Like to Have*, designed by architect Alessio Frampolli under the guidance of writer Lidia Morelli who described the house in her texts in 1933 (Figure 4), and *Casa del dopolavorista* [Dopolavorista House] (1930) by Luisa Lovarini (Figure 1 and Figure 2). The latter was exhibited at the Triennale, which was exceptionally held at Monza in 1930 as part of the ongoing research on middle-class habitat in Italy. Some parallels can be drawn between Lovarini's design and the renowned proposal by Franco Albini (and his collaborators) of *Alloggio per Quattro Persone* [Dwelling for Four People], exhibited in 1936 at the VI Milan Triennale. He designed an

abstract grid and an open-plan solution that could have potentially inspired Italian radical architects such as Superstudio and Archizoom; the house is indeed an installation with no architectural boundaries.

Lovarini's project is instead, 'anchored in reality.' She proposed a full-scale model exhibited in the Triennale's gardens. Albin's project is a sequence of modernist furniture that qualifies the spaces of the house, whereas Lovarini's architecture includes custom-designed pieces of furniture. Each piece is simple yet detailed and somewhat nostalgic, as it recalls traditional, artisanal furniture (Figure 2), clearly reflecting the "conservative" modernist aesthetic theorised by Sparke (1995/2010, p. 98). Figure 2 also shows the presence of a living room or *salotto*, the typically middle-class living room that was despised by modernist architects and taste reformers (Forlini, 2021). Overall, her design seems to be informed by first-hand experience, that of an Italian woman in the 1930s. Conversely, Albin's project is a formal experiment aimed at showcasing the refined taste of the heroic, male modernist architect—even better exemplified by his renowned project of a *Room for a Man* exhibited in the same Triennale (1936)—demonstrating his distance from cultural domesticity and above all, lived experience.

The second project, *Casa per un Quartierino Moderno* [House for a Modern District], was designed in 1921 and represents a transition phase from the 19th-century (rural) to the 20th-century (urban) model. It was a 110 sqm home for a young married couple, designed for a housewife with no domestic servants, which was the norm even for wealthier Italian women and above all, it is considered the first residential project designed by an amateur woman architect tailored exclusively to women (Cosseta, 2000, p. 52). The house incorporates a study and a guest room; and the dining room and kitchen are the biggest rooms. Here, the dining room and kitchen merge into a single environment, occupying the right side of the plan. The heart of the domestic, intimate sphere is the kitchen, which thanks to its generous size, can turn into a space for socialisation (Cosseta, 2000).

The House I'd Like to Have, conceived by prolific writer Morelli in the 1930s, is another ideal project created by a woman who had no previous background in architecture and which demonstrates Italian women's active engagement in the design of domestic spaces (Figure 4). The project described in her book is a negotiation between the writer's fascination with architectural Modernism and her attachment to 19th-century domesticity with a decidedly upper-class, traditional outcome (Cosseta, 2000, p. 62) that, once again, reflects women's conservative aesthetics (Sparke, 1995/2010). Concerning this point,

Salvati (1993) clarifies that in the post-war period, well-off apartments retained more elements of the 19th-century type than any other social class and this project precisely illustrates that. The relevance of this book (and the project that emerged from it) stands in the direct engagement of the author in architectural design as she used her voice to publicise women's valuable contributions to the discipline.

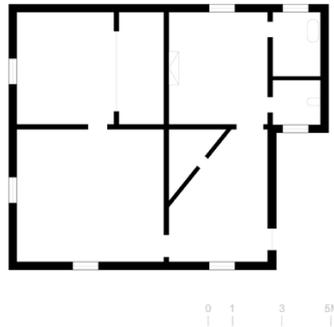


Figure 3
Plan of a House for
a Modern District of
the 1920s (Image by
author, redrawn from
Cosseta (2000))

In fact, the same Morelli advocated for the recognition of women's role in architecture, praising Lovarini's work among others in her writings. At the same time, together with her colleague Irene Brin, she criticised Italian male modernist architects, who reproduced "tombs" driven by their fascination—never supported by critical thought—for European modernism (Cosseta, 2000, pp. 54–57). Morelli (1933) and Brin's (1944) position summarises the tensions between masculine modernism and feminine culture; as women were pushed to the margins of high culture, they used all possible means to express their lucid dissent. Morelli's (1933) point on women designers is also a particularly strong feminist stance, given Mussolini's (1927) opinion on women in architecture pronounced only six years before:

La donna deve obbedire. ... Ha forse mai fatto dell'architettura in tutti questi secoli? Le dica di costruirmi una capanna, non dico un tempio! Non lo può! Essa è estranea all'architettura, che è la sintesi di tutte le arti, e ciò è un simbolo del suo destino.

[Each woman must obey. ... Has any woman ever designed architectures in the past centuries? You may ask her to design a hut, not even a temple! She can't. She is foreign to architecture, that is the synthesis of all arts, and this is a symbol of her destiny]. (Mussolini, 1927, as cited in "Benito Mussolini," 2021)

The first woman graduate in architecture in Italy was Elena Luzzatto Valentini who received her degree in Rome in 1925. In 1935, only 13 women were practising the profession, but even if numbers continued to grow in the following decades, the work of Italian women architects did not receive any recognition until two renowned geniuses, Lina Bo Bardi (who graduated in 1939) and Gae Aulenti (who received her degree in 1954) gained public commissions, respectively in the 1950s and 1980s—and in both cases, abroad.

Journalist Anna Maria Speckel contributed to the discussion on Italian women in architecture with an article in *Almanacco della Donna Italiana* titled *Architettura Moderna e Donne in Architettura* [Modern Architecture and Women in Architecture] (1935), in which she illustrated the work of the women architects who were operating in the country, partially responding to Mussolini's (1927) delirium by acknowledging women's difficulty in grappling with the grandiose and monumental, but at the same time strongly arguing women's undeniable success in the field of the house, implying both its management but above all design, both at the small scale of a house and that of a *palazzo*, thanks to her analytical logic, practicality, and common sense.

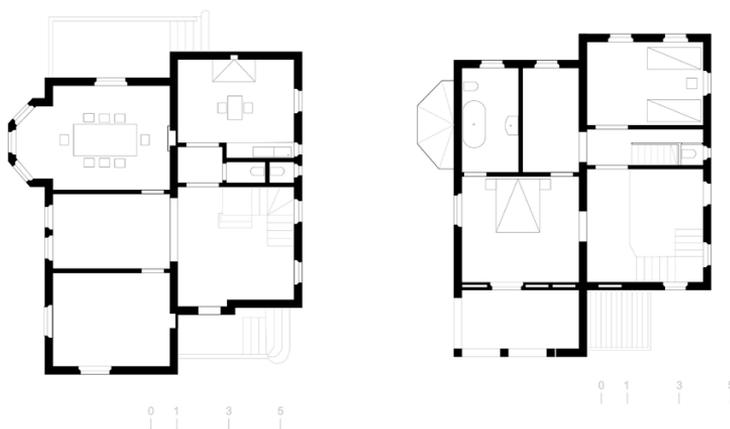


Figure 4
La Casa che Vorrei Avere (Image by author, redrawn from Cossetta (2000))

According to Cossetta (2000), not by chance both the House for Modern District and the Dopolavorista House were considered virtuous by both the public and critics, as they were modern and practical homes and both had sober furnishings.⁸ Despite the quality of the women

⁸ Few parallels can be drawn between the prototypes designed by modernist male and female architects. In fact, even though female architects embraced the overall project of simplification of interior furnishings, the domestic spaces showcased demonstrate a greater interest in recreating a cozy environment, more in line with feminine taste and domesticity. The interiors of the Dopolavorista House (1930) are very different, for

architects' proposals, none of these noteworthy projects were implemented on a large scale and this was certainly due to the lack of legitimisation of female architectural production, a lack that persists in the Italian architectural panorama and architectural history more in general.

Speckel's (1935) point on women's ability to translate their sensitivity, knowledge, and expertise into the design of domestic space describes precisely the feminine domestic cultures analysed, as design in the home is both a combination of conscious and unconscious decisions that have the potential to alter architectural space. As aforementioned, design in the domestic context is seen here as a continuous process informed by daily experience, making the work of both inhabitants and amateur designers architecturally valuable. Regardless of the woman's profession, education, or the degree of spatial intervention, each design choice studied demonstrates a facet of feminine cultural domesticity. The projects described—which are doubtlessly just an infinitesimal portion of the architectural production of Italian women architects and amateurs in the interwar and post-war period—are incredibly valuable, as they not only testify to the conscious engagement of women in design but also because they illustrate the value of women's input in residential architecture. Through the proposal of valuable spatial solutions, which might be seen as traditional, backward, or even 'minor,' these women established the boundaries of women's taste and needs, but also spatial and domestic culture. Once again, Morelli (1933) summarised in her book some of the principles behind such an approach, claiming that domestic architecture can express the choices of its designer and can have specific characteristics, but above all, it should not dominate human existence nor constrain its inhabitants and their individual character (Morelli, 1933).

It is worth noting that from the interwar period onwards, renowned architecture and design magazines such as *Domus* began advertising a certain type of interior design in Italy, captivating readers with a new taste in home interior decoration based on simplicity and modernity of style. The new design, including the new housing, was intended to educate citizens in a new way of life. However, two fundamental factors interrupted this project. The first was the failure of the middle and lower classes to afford modern furniture and objects

instance, from those designed by Giuseppe Terragni in his *Casa sul Lago per Artista* [House for an Artist by the Lake], showcased in the same exhibition. Many interesting projects designed by notable female architects have been forgotten; however, they paved the way for a new analysis of the architecture of women architects in 20th-century Italy.

economically, as they quickly became luxury goods.⁹ The second, as previously anticipated through Casciato's (1988) words, pertains to the resistance by the middle and working class to the simplifications brought about by European modernism, the form adopted by all major Italian architects and designers of the post-war period.

Brin (1944) ironically wrote that while refined individuals furnished their homes with tube chairs, the unsuspecting majority used false 15th-century red damask (p. 186) and Casciato (1988, p. 573) clarified that while Italy was becoming an industrialised country, a new yet anachronistic cultural model of interior furnishing emerged; it was widespread (across all social classes) and did not align with the transformative values of rationalism and new industrial processes. Furthermore, it maintained its aesthetic and ideal values and never disappeared despite modernists' strong criticism. Needless to say, she is referring to the conservative, middle-class family model and home. The plan to disseminate a new taste in the decoration of interiors through specialised magazines and national exhibitions took initial hold of the upper classes. This social group not only had the financial resources to buy these new pieces of design but also adopted—even if just in part—the modern style to furnish their *salotti* or living rooms (Forlini, 2021). This choice was probably made to distinguish themselves from the middle class, which at the time had begun to imitate precisely those same well-off domestic interiors (Salvati, 1993).¹⁰

The widespread rejection of modern taste in interior decoration triggered the reaction of architects, technocrats, and taste reformers, who wrote with frustration: the widespread rejection of modern taste in interior decoration triggered the reaction of architects, technocrats, and taste reformers, who denounced with contempt that if 'petty-bourgeois' and craftsmen's families persisted in distributing their interior spaces mimicking the upper classes (by decorating rooms as a *salotto* or office space) they would have imposed a new standard of living through the design of a new housing that would lead to a simpler taste. They also emphasised that this could be achieved thanks to a good use of partitions inside these new dwellings (Salvati, 1993, p. 10).

⁹ An exemplary case is the story of Charlotte Perriand and Le Corbusier's furniture which was meant to be affordable but soon became exclusive luxurious goods.

¹⁰ Quoted from Luigi Bigiaretti's article *L'Arredamento della Casa* [The Home's Furnishing] published on *Grondaie* in 1935.

The taste reformers' failure to modernise Italian society, as well as the persistence of old furniture and highly decorated interiors (Forlini, 2021; Sparke, 1995/2010), reflect not only the relevance of conservative modernism in the study of women's spatial design practices and taste but also the persistence of traditional symbols that still populate inter- and post-war domestic interiors today.

Conclusion

The national, social, ideological, and cultural construction of the modern Italian home encapsulates some important dynamics that led to the emergence of a typically feminine approach to architectural design inspired by traditional aesthetics. This allowed Italian women to negotiate their modern identities through minor design solutions or overlooked projects worthy of further investigation.

Because of the turns of Italian history and the strong changes brought by the Fascist regime, Italian women found themselves nailed to granitic roles and structures and reacted to them in various ways. If some, like Lidia Morelli and Irene Brin, used their voice to criticise the typically masculine approach to architectural modernism, others, like Luisa Lovarini proposed a more feminine interpretation of domestic spaces and furniture. In short, they reacted in different ways to the oppressive system that kept forcing them into stereotyped roles, rethinking the architectural space, spatial, domestic practices, and consumption choices. In fact, they were "not only housewives, consumers" but they saw "consumption as spaces for self-expression and creative identity resource" (Asquer, 2011, p. 65). This led to a peculiar approach to homemaking that reflects the singularity of the Italian context and exemplifies the relevance of cultural domesticity.

In conclusion, through *cultural domesticity*, this essay insists on the cultural, spatial, and aesthetic value of women's domestic practices and cultures. As shown, they directly impact the design and use of domestic spaces, making women active design agents. Their hidden or overt mechanisms of resistance—among which stands out the explicit reaction of the first, sadly unknown, Italian women architects—open new paths for the study and understanding of women's contribution to architectural design.

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