Chapter Eight

Room for independence: Home-based women workers and their interiors

Del Puppo Fiona, Perron Paule

Illustrations

Figure 1. Interpretative sketch of Virginia Woolf's and Laura's workrooms. 2022. Drawings by Paule Perron and Fiona Del Puppo.

Figure 2. Interpretative sketch of Pia's, Dalila's and Laura's workrooms. 2022. Drawings by Paule Perron and Fiona Del Puppo.

Figure 3. Interpretative sketch of Alice's and Sophie's border-objects. 2022. Drawings by Paule Perron and Fiona Del Puppo.

Figure 4. Interpretative sketch of Sylvie's inhabited hallway. 2022. Drawings by Paule Perron and Fiona Del Puppo.

Introduction

During the Covid-19 era, the popular media have often encouraged women to deal with their stress by transforming their interiors. This illustrates the continuation of the prescribed and perceived role of women as carers (Molinier 2021: 30) and homemakers. Combining paid work with the other responsibilities assigned to them, they are expected to find fulfilment in these tasks. This observation encouraged us to renew our interest in the interior, the privileged space not only of invisible labour and inequalities, but also of an essentialist vision of feminine independence. However, from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (Woolf

1929: 4) to Mona Chollet's *Chez-soi* (Chollet 2015: 9), feminist writers through the years have highlighted the emancipatory power of a familiar enclosed and controlled environment. The lockdowns and transformation of the rhythms of daily life that accompanied the Covid-19 era highlight the domestic sphere as both a space of independence and of resistance to gender domination patterns *and* as a space that perpetuates and enhances these gender inequalities. This chapter is based on the experiences of seven female home-workers, collected through semi-directed interviews.[1] Long before the Covid-19 situation, they had been seduced by the opportunities offered by new technologies to become independent home-based workers.

As our built environment - including home interiors – is produced by a patriarchal society, we suggest that it directly contributes to gender inequalities (Dadour 2018: 15). We aim to interrogate this relationship in the context of the home and to understand the material strategies implemented to cope with these domination dynamics before and during the Covid-19 lockdown. We focus on the situations of mainly white Northern European women, working in independent jobs from home (most of our interviewees are highly educated and in intellectual or creative professions) and living in hetero-sexual households.[2] In this chapter we aim to define the concept of independence and to reflect on the material tools that home-based women have developed in order to negotiate their experiences of working domesticity. We will focus on the part space plays in this organisation and interrogate the possibility of independence in confined spaces.

Home-based and independent

The Oxford dictionary defines independence as 'the freedom to organise your own life, make your own decisions, etc. without needing help from other people.' It has long been promoted as a virtuous concept, containing the emancipatory power required to question the social

reproduction that perpetuates injustice. This was especially the case in the 1970s feminist movement which made women's independence the central tool with which to achieve equality (Appay 2012: 2).

Since 1990, neoliberalism has influenced a shift in work organisation from external supervision towards autonomy, self-control, and self-evaluation (Jouan 2012: 3). Yet, by questioning a vertical hierarchy model, this management ideology also imposes on individuals a responsibility for constant adaptation and availability (Perilleux 2001: 35). It promotes access to independence at the price of stability. Indeed, both working hours and employment status become less stable with the increase of independent work and temporary and short-term contracts (Bergström and Storrie 2003: 2).

Many coaching discourses promote individual development and fulfilment through autonomy at work. Instead of embracing freedom from all structures, they encourage strong boundaries between private and professional life and advocate a spatial and temporal 'territory hygiene' (Salman 2014: 48). This gives a rigid structure to the instability of everyday life. Aimed primarily at women, who experience an overlap between the different spheres of existence (Zimmermann 2011: 91), this encourages a new ideal of feminine self-realisation. Like in many women lifestyle magazine mentioning Covid-19 and home-office, an online article from *Journal des femmes* suggests 'Create a house zoning; Ease the access to toys; Don't let the mess accumulate; Tidy the food supplies; Clearly separate the working space; Establish a planning for house chores.' (Hebrard 2020 : online). It illustrates the imperative for women to be in charge of the spatial and material dimensions of the home. They are more likely than men to turn to independent work as a coping strategy to achieve this balance (Marlow 1997: 3). When questioned about why she chose self-employment, Laura - a 31 year old independent artist and entrepreneur who sells her art mainly on Esty and

lives with her partner (a PhD student) in a two-bedroom rented apartment in Geneva - enlightened us on these multi-layered considerations, 'I always knew that you know childcare is a massive thing' she explained. 'If you are self-employed that eases that up quite a lot. I'm also really bad at being told what to do. I'm not a good employee at all.' (Laura 2020: 6).

The women discussed in this chapter were encouraged to embrace the flexibility offered by independent work, enabled by new technologies, which promised a work/life balance. Independent women workers are also more likely than men to locate their workplace within the home rather than establish separate business premises or workshops (Ehlers et Main 1998: 6). They deliberately place themselves in the middle of domestic agitation instead of seeking shelter from it. The independent inhabitant of Woolf's room, who needed a space to compose away from agitation, has been transformed into a neoliberal, flexible independent subject (Fraser 2013: online) who struggles with both patriarchal and capitalist pressures within her domestic space.

The domestication of independence

The current flexibility of the professional sphere encourages workers, and especially women, to aim for independence. Within the context of the domestic economy, Virginia Woolf, in 1929, had already addressed the financial independence of women. She stated that, in order to access freedom to write, women needed money to support themselves (Woolf 1929: 20). One might suppose that being self-employed is indeed a way for women, usually disadvantaged in most work organisations, to achieve financial independence. Because of the instability of their incomes, many of our interviewees, such as Laura, suggested the opposite dynamic, 'I'd say you are probably more independent because you have guaranteed income coming in, whereas I am reliant at the moment on my partner. [...] I wouldn't say it [online small business ownership] is a way to empower women to have independence.' (Laura 2020 : 14).

Besides providing unstable remuneration, independent work, especially when it is home-based, also needs to blend in with other time-consuming and unpaid activities. Feminist writers have already challenged the traditional division of paid work performed outside and domestic activities happening inside the home by defining the concept of the 'domestication of work' (Martín Palomo 2009: 2). Not only does this concept highlight domestic activities as legitimate work, it also acknowledges the evolution of paid labour towards an activity that can take place at home. Its organisation increasingly values adaptability, versatility, and availability, and imposes an unstable and elastic time schedule, much like domestic work. Through the experiences of the women interviewed, we propose the notion of the 'domestication of independence' through which to study the flexibility of both domestic and independent work blended within the home.

From the domestication of independence to autonomy

In *A Room of One's Own* (Woolf 1929: 88), Woolf associates the privatisation of space with the freedom to organise her time freely within that space, the protection from distraction or domestic obligations, and the constant reassessment of its ownership. The enclosed room she describes is a non-negotiable space, free from all social constraints. She refers to an autonomy that relies strongly on the capacity to escape any social and normative rules, to compose your own temporality, and to create a distance from the social world in order to be able to be part of it (Pattaroni 2007: 13). In this chapter we refer to autonomy as emancipatory. Alexandra, an independent artist, describes it through the experience of isolation, 'In my opinion you need to have a haven. Like a layer. Somewhere you don't let anyone in. [...] but that's basically what an artist needs. You need to be alone. You and the universe.' (Alexandra 2020 : 3)

Yet independent work relies on social constraints, including the neoliberal version of independence that pressures individuals into the need for self-realisation. Therefore, inside the spatial qualities of the necessary separation from the social world reside the negotiating tools to achieve a domestic experience that is more or less free from both professional and domestic requirements. The enactment, defined as the entanglement of actors (the inhabitants); acts (the situations the interviewees described to us); and the architecture (the material conditions of the household observed and transcribed by us) of home, (Bonnevier 2007: 16) helps us to identify the spatial strategies that the interviewees use to negotiate their domesticated independence. This leads us to study the possibilities of autonomy offered by this domestication of independence.

The possibility of a boundary

In Woolf's writings, architectural features (a wall, a door, and a flight of stairs) are ways of distancing gendered hierarchical behaviours. The physical separations they create enable her to develop transgressive discourses, without them being directly submitted to, or silenced by, a patriarchal audience (Bonnevier 2007: 389). Space acts as both a setting and a condition to tackle what she identifies as the social and domestic pressures directed at women. Ahead of second-wave feminism Woolf upheld the development of women's independence through material and spatial culture.

Most of our interviewees (5 out of 7 women) confirmed that Woolf's closable room was essential to deal with the incorporation of their professional, independent activities within the home. However, their experiences deeply differed from Woolf's. Laura, for example, explained that the closable room helps to contain professional pressures within it and protect the rest of the domestic sphere from them, 'The simple act of being able to shut the door….is huge. I will not go into the studio and...my workroom unless I am working. [...] That room is only for working. And that really helps.' (Laura 2020 : 7)

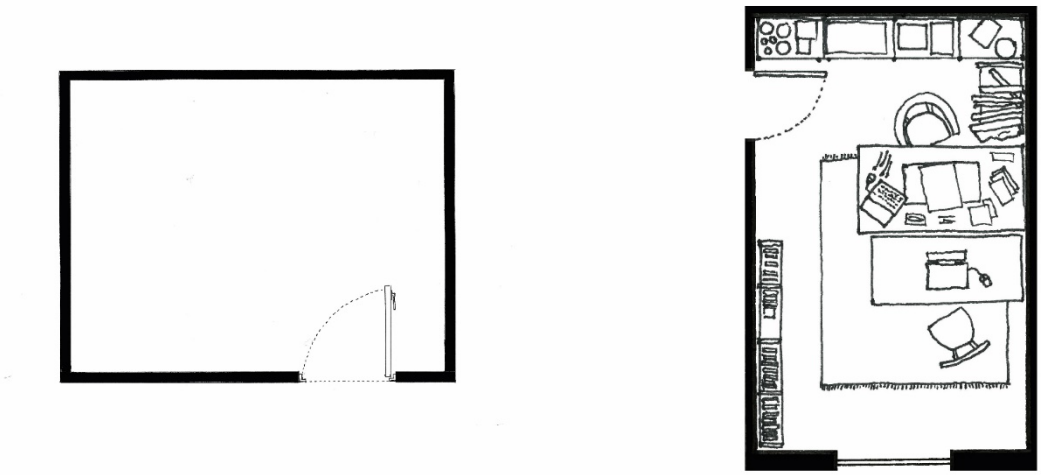

Figure 1.

In the nineteenth century, the incorporation of hallways within the home produced a spatial compartmentalisation of activities and space ownership (Evans 1978: 62). It reinforced the gendered specification of spaces, such as the feminine *boudoir* or the masculine study (Logoz 2021: 18). In the beginning of the twentieth century, the normative nuclear household established the standard European home that still shapes housing production today. Master bedrooms, bedrooms, and living rooms are hierarchised (by size

and position) living units, while kitchens, bathrooms, and toilets are smaller functional rooms positioned to perpetuate the patriarchal household structure (Evans 1997: 54).

Woolf's room - the habitation unit - has been, in the past hundred years, the financial core of western architectural production. The struggling incorporation of the interviewed women's neoliberal borderless professional activities within such a home architecture challenges the contemporary relevance of a rigid material boundary (Woolf's walls and door). Partly because of the emergence of digital objects (phones, computers) along with calls, emails (from within her workroom, Laura mentioned dealing with pressures related to social media, the time it consumes and the pressure of overachieving that it creates), this rigid boundary of the working area fails to prevent non-domestic pressures related to work flexibility and domestic ones from colliding with each other.

Unstable boundaries

In the shared space of a home, the privatisation of a room for individual purposes and the creation of an unequal distribution of spatial resources, are under constant negotiation (de Singly 2000: 231). This produces inevitable frustrations and frictions (Evans 1978: 85) and instils instability in the boundaries between different inhabited spaces. The act of inhabitation itself, through settling in and arranging a space, creates a familiar environment in which furniture and personal belongings testify to individual space appropriation (Breviglieri et al. 2003: 92). The observed overlapping of different activities or space ownership intertwines the notion of domesticated independence with the notion of cohabitation. To understand the spatial arrangements related to sharing a private space, we need to pay attention to the unstable boundaries it produces, the temporality of their variations, and the potential for the inhabited space to absorb it.

Pia, a 39-year-old nutrition coach, lives in a rented apartment with her husband and child in a three-bedroom rented apartment in Geneva. The room dedicated to her professional activities also acts as a storage room for clothing and miscellaneous accumulated things. This part of her office acts as the backstage to the domestic scene. What is left of it for her working space relies on the amount of non-essential elements stored to protect her child and husband's domestic experiences in the rest of the house. As it happened gradually, this growing storage encroaching on to her workspace didn't trigger any tensions. She describes it as the 'junkyard' and she acknowledges the uncomfortable messy impression it gives and the typical feeling of losing control of her own space (Breviglieri *et al.* 2003: 112). As Pia explains, 'This is an old drum, [...] it's not at all decorative in my office, we don't know where to put it… To the office! So, there is a lot of stuff like this, it burdens me a lot but… I cannot handle it.' (Pia 2021 : 9)

Hidden behind the opaque wall, this burden doesn't affect the other members of the household, but it manifests in Pia's workspace as an additional domestic pressure.

In Laura's case, what she defines as 'her' workroom is shared with her boyfriend who sometimes works at home. He placed a desk there and arranged his belongings around it, thereby extending his familiar environment into Laura's privatised workroom. This created an area of tension between different kinds of space appropriation (Breviglieri 2009: 21). Even though nothing prevents Laura from using the whole room when her partner is absent, his familiar environment is inconsistent with a setting where her work activity would naturally find ease and comfort. His ownership of this part of the room acts as a very real limitation on the space she uses. Within the room there are also limits on the space she can control (for example by setting a sound environment she enjoys for work). These fluctuate depending on her partner's schedule.

The limitations of the workspace which rely on the rhythms of the other members of the household appear daily in the home of Dalila, a thirty-seven year old Tunisian who lives with her husband and their three children in a rented three-bedroom apartment in Geneva. She dedicates the night-time to work once she has completed all the housework and the others have finished their days. When her husband is asleep, she uses the desk she installed in their bedroom to work on. The obscurity of the night-time offers a thin atmospheric boundary that isolates her, but which is fragile. Its qualities depend on others, and on her own ability to de-synchronise herself from social temporalities (work during the day, rest during the night). This immateriality prevents her from acting on it and the hierarchical organisation of her social life from being challenged.

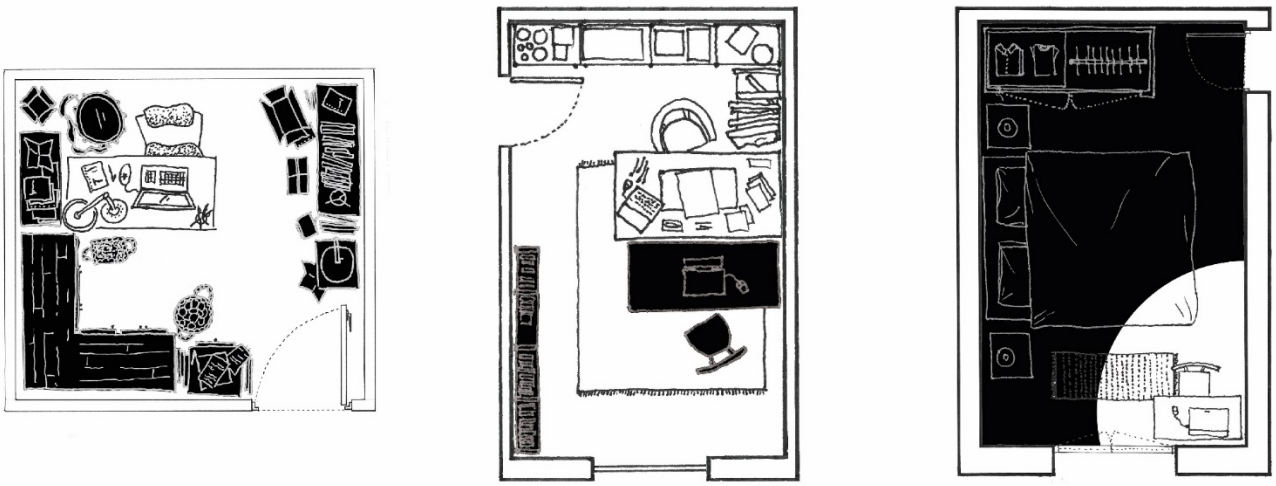

Figure 2.

The instability of the non-material limits of Laura's sound environment and Dalila's lighting atmosphere compromises the existence of a controlled workspace. However, it also ensures the possibility of its negotiation. Although, for them to be able to react to these frictions, to build demarcations to protect both their working space and their autonomy, they

need their separation to exist materially (Debray 2013: 36). Just as the linear wall forbids passage, the thick border, on the contrary, regulates it. In the intertwined thickness and instability of this boundary lies a politically active territory, a ‘space-of-variation’ (Manning 2019: 2).

The thick boundary

Alexandra found in the three hundred metres separation between her domestic sphere and her rented workshop the material answer to an ‘out-of-time’ experience (Barbey 1990: 101), which she needed to be able to negotiate her autonomy. However, this thick, but stable, separation doesn’t protect her from domestic pressures. As she explains, ‘I only spend …3 half days of the week there. So otherwise I have to come back and do something at home’. (Alexandra 2020: 5)

The separation doesn’t allow both entities to exist concurrently but tries to force the impossible disappearance of one or the other for a short period of time. There is no room for negotiation. Two of our interviewees found answers in the articulation of border-objects (Star and Griesemer 1989: 393), malleable enough to absorb the material and variable existences of the two spheres it separates. Alice, a twenty-six-year-old video game streamer who lives alone in a one-bedroom rented apartment near Paris, has installed a thick shelf which separates her professional space from her personal space. She had to cope with her apartment being visible through her webcam, ‘Actually, my apartment is well divided [...] I've put the [shelf] to split. [...] it’s really extremely separated.’ (Alice 2020: 14)

Professional interactions are spatially restrained between her screen and her shelf. By arranging each side of this shelf differently, she controls the image she wants to give on camera and preserves the display of her privacy on the other side, ‘There is the part facing me being 100 % video game and stuff. And the other side is more lifestyle, like my jewellery...’

(Alice 2020: 4). Her ability to arrange space and to control the boundary between her different spheres of activities created the possibility of autonomy.

Sophie, a 41-year-old architect, who lives with her partner in his large family house, has materialised a personal protected space with an ‘armchair’ and ‘books’. She explains that ‘It’s a corner where I can [...] be sheltered, I mean, from the world, kinda. It would be my books, a good armchair.’ (Sophie 2021: 29) More than the major architectural structure of the unit-based habitation, inhabited object-borders (Alice’s shelf, Sophie’s armchair) act as minor architectures (Stoner 2012: 12) that gives a right-to-answer to its inhabitant.

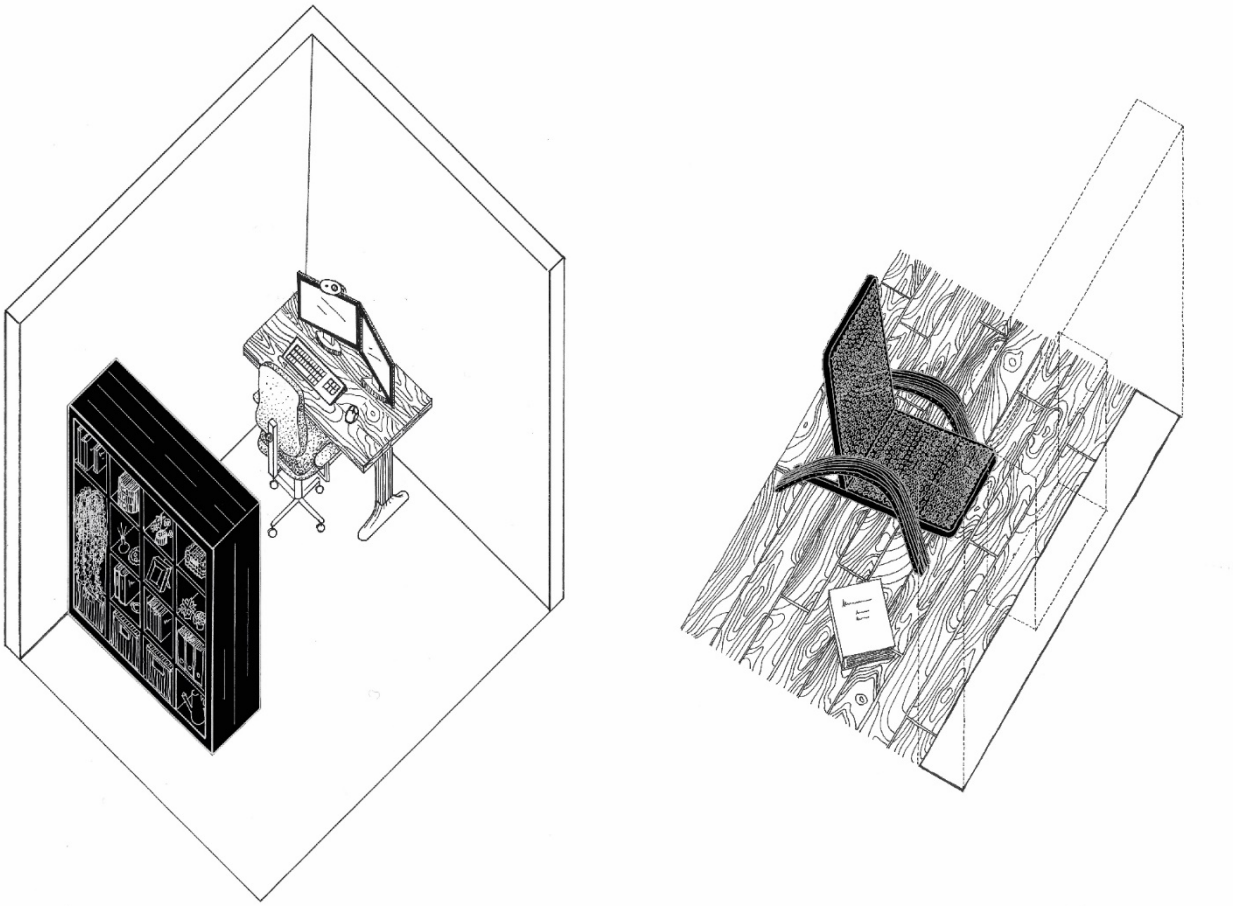

Figure 3.

Sylvie, a 44-year-old seamstress (and former nurse) who lives with her husband and three children in a four-bedroom rented apartment in Geneva, has installed her practice in the main hall in her apartment which separates the intended collective areas from the bedrooms and bathrooms. Choosing to place herself in ‘the centre of the agitation’ can be understood as a result of her assigned role as caregiver in the family. Nevertheless, by putting her desks and working furniture in the hall, she controls the movement of people during the day. Through

her own agency (Butler 1990: 128) and by inhabiting the thickness of this protective boundary, she determines when the common rooms act as collective spaces and produces a domesticated independence she controls the rhythm of.

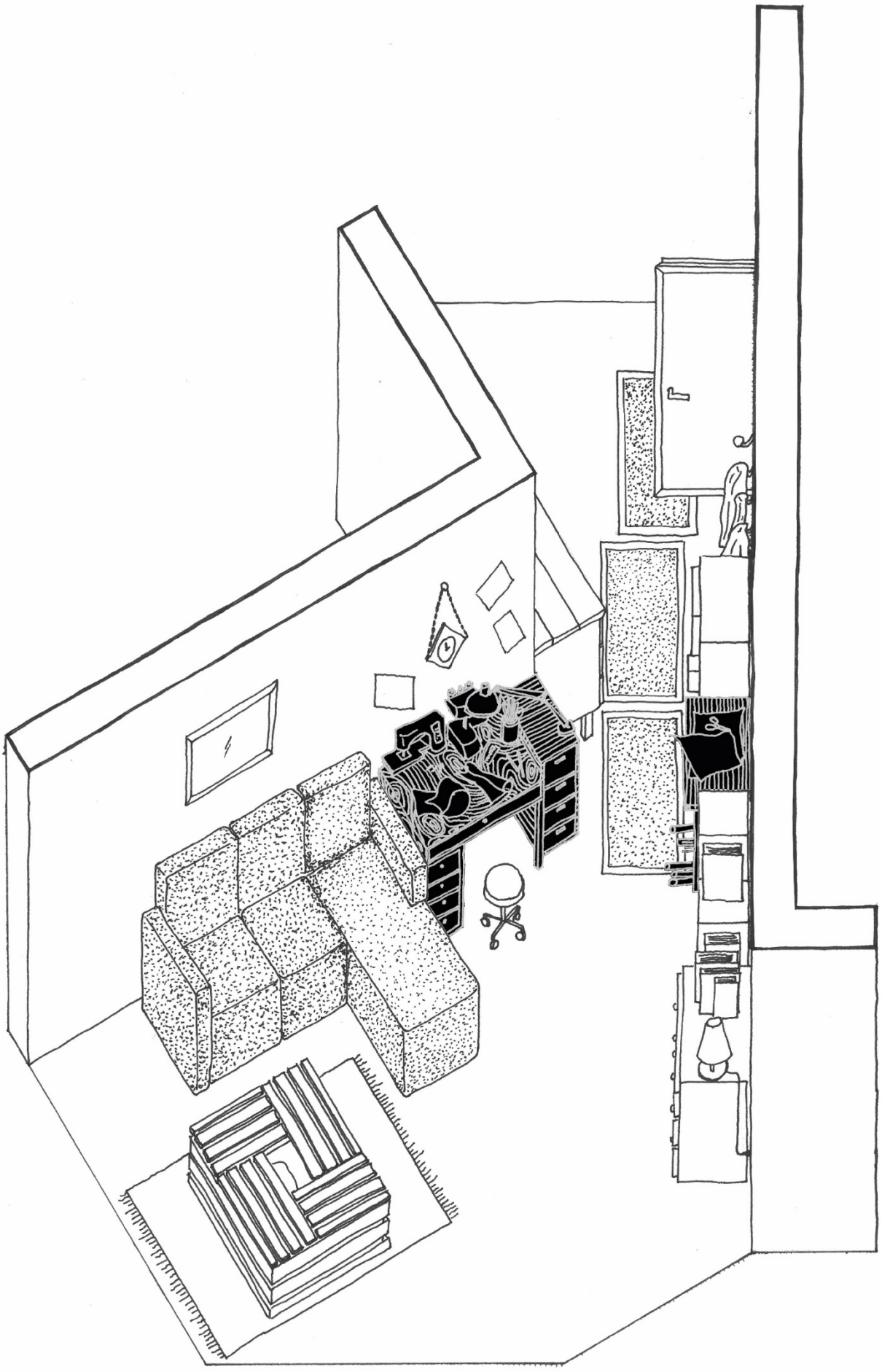

Figure 4.

Conclusion

Conceptualising the domestication of independence has led us to study the spatial strategies implemented by home-working women to integrate the neoliberal ideal independent subject within a patriarchal matrix: the architectural structures of homes. Through the daily reproduction of minor gestures, the professionally and domestically inhabiting body interiorises and perpetuates social and hierarchical norms (Froidevaux Metterie 2021: 100). However, it also provides an opportunity for its subversion, for the body experience to be transformed into its own expression (Manning 2019: 7). Through their own agencies, and when given the spatial opportunity, the seven women we studied are controlling the boundaries of their spaces. Within the thickness of these limits, (which depend on material qualities but also on the social interactions they articulate), and through their instability, the gestures of their inhabiting bodies enable negotiation and make room for autonomy. The enactment of these seven domestic spaces provides a glimpse of a built environment that gives bodies the opportunity to push back.

---

[1] These case studies are part of a wider body of work that is part of the research project 'Domotopy: At home in a world in motion' led by Luca Pattaroni (Urban Sociology Laboratory, École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne) financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (n° 192831). This project started in September 2020 and involves a multidisciplinary team of sociologists, architects, engineers and geographers. It is partnered with HEAD - Genève and Line Fontana's interior design workshop.

[2] The whole body of work consists of thirty-four semi-directed interviews, with thirty-eight interviewees, including twenty-two women and sixteen men between twenty-four and seventy years of age. The interviewees mainly live in Switzerland, mostly in the Geneva area, one of them in France (Paris area). The interviews mainly took place at the interviewees' home, but eight of them were conducted via Zoom (considering the sanitary restrictions at the time). Most were led in teams of two, by either Dr. Garance Clément, sociologist, or Paule Perron and Fiona Del Puppo, architects. They were all recorded. Photography and architectural drawing were used as a complementary ethnography method in order to describe the spatial and material qualities of the interviewees' places.

References

Hebrard, J. (2020), '6 pieces of advice for a better home organisation during lockdown', *Journal des femmes,* November 2020. (Quotes translated from French by the authors). Available online: https://deco.journaldesfemmes.fr/tendances-deco/2626377-conseils-pour-mieux-organiser-la-maison-pendant-le-confinement/ (accessed 12.01.21).

Appay, B. (2012), 'De l'autonomie émancipatrice à l'injonction d'autonomie', *Vie sociale* 1 (1): 29. https://doi.org/10.3917/vsoc.121.0029 (accessed 14.01.21).

Barbey, G. (1990), *L'évasion domestique: Essai sur les relations d'affectivité au logis.* Lausanne: Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes.

Bergström, O. and Storrie, D. W. (2003), *Contingent Employment in Europe and the United States*. Cheltenham : Edward Elgar Publishing.

Bonnevier, K. (200), *Behind Straight Curtains: Towards a Queer Feminist Theory of Architecture*, Stockholm : Axl Books.

Breviglieri, M., Lafaye, C., and Economica, D. (eds.) . (2009), 'L'insupportable. L'excès de Proximité, l'atteinte à l'autonomie et Le Sentiment de Violation Du Privé', *Competences Critiques et Sens de La Justice* https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01533280 (accessed 14.01.21).

Breviglieri, M., Conein, B. Garcia, P., Pattaroni, L., and Stavo-Debauge, J. (2003), 'Tenir Ensemble et Vivre Avec. Explorations Sociologiques de l'inclination à Cohabiter', *Rapport de l'action Financée Par Le Programme Habitat et Vie Urbaine* (PUCA), Paris : Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale.

Judith, B. (1990), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. London and New York: Routledge editions.

Chollet, M. (2015), *Chez soi, une odyssée de l'espace domestique*, Paris: Zones.

Stéphanie. D. (2020). 'Introduction: architecture et féminisme: De la théorie critique à l'action – Qu'entend-on par "architecture féministe" ? Une manière inclusive et critique

d'approcher le projet et non une "sensibilité" spécifique', *Des féminismes en architecture* 6: 9-23, Paris : Revue Malaquais

Debray, R. (2013) *Éloge des frontières,* Paris: Folio. De Singly, F. (2000), *Libres ensemble: l'individualisme dans la vie commune,* Paris: Cle International.

Ehlers, T. B. and Main, K. (1998), 'Women and the false promise of Microenterprise', *Gender & Society* 12 (4): 424–40, https://doi.org/10.1177/089124398012004004 (accessed 14.01.21).

Evans, R.. (1997), 'Figures, Doors and Passages', *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays*: 54-91 Place of publication: MIT Press.

Nacy, F. (2013) 'How feminism became capitalism's handmaiden - and how to reclaim it', The Guardian, online. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/14/feminism-capitalist-handmaiden-neoliberal (accessed 14.01.21).

Froidevaux-Metterie, C.. (2021), *Un corps à soi*, Paris : Seuil.

Hughes, K. D. (2003), 'Pushed or Pulled? Women's Entry into Self-Employment and Small Business Ownership', *Gender, Work & Organization* 10 (4): 433–54. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0432.00205 (accessed 14.01.21).

Jouan, M. (2012), 'L'autonomie, entre aspiration et injonction : un idéal ?' *Vie sociale* 1 (1): 41. https://doi.org/10.3917/vsoc.121.0041 (accessed 14.01.21).

Logoz, C. A. (2021) *Scénographie du genre*. Master thesis, EPFL scientific publications.

Manning, E. (2016), *The minor gesture*, Durham and London: Duke University Press..

Manyka, J., and al. (2016), *Independent Work: Choice, Necessity, and the Gig Economy*, San Francisco : McKinsey Global Institute.

Marlow, S. (1997), 'Self–Employed Women — New Opportunities, Old Challenges?' *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 9 (3): 199–210. https://doi.org/10.1080/08985629700000011 (accessed 14.01.21).

———. (2002), 'Women and Self-Employment: A Part of or Apart from Theoretical Construct?', *The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation* 3 (2): 83–91. https://doi.org/10.5367/000000002101299088 (accessed 14.01.21).

Martín P., Teresa, M. (2009), 'Domestiquer le travail', *Multitudes* 37–38 (2): 90. https://doi.org/10.3917/mult.037.0090 (accessed 14.01.21).

Molinier, P.. (2021), *Le travail du care*, Paris : La Dispute

Pattaroni, L. (2007), 'Le Sujet En l'individu : La Promesse d'autonomie Du Travail Social Au Risque d'une Colonisation Par Le Proche', *Action Publique et Subjectivité, Droit et Société*, 46: 203–18, Paris : LGDJ.

Perilleux, T. (2001), *Les tensions de la flexibilité*, Paris: DDB.

Salman, S.. (2014), 'Un coach pour battre la mesure ?', *Revue d'anthropologie des connaissances* 8 (1). https://journals.openedition.org/rac/3965#tocto2n4 (accessed 14.01.21).

Star, S.L., Griesemer, J. (1989), 'Institutionnal ecology, "Translations", and Boundary objects: amateurs and professionals on Berkeley's museum of vertrebate zoologie', *Social Studies of Science*, 19(3): 387-420.

Stoner, J. (2012), *Toward A Minor Architecture*. Cambridge : MIT Press.

Woolf, V. (1989 [1929]), *A Room of One's Own*, San Diego: Mariner Books.

Zimmermann, B. (2011), *Ce que travailler veut dire: une sociologie des capacités et des parcours professionnels,* Paris: Economica.

Interviews

Laura, Interview (with Garance Clément and Fiona Del Puppo), Geneva (via Zoom), Switzerland, 2020.

Alexandra, Interview (with Garance Clément and Fiona Del Puppo), Geneva (via Zoom), Switzerland, 2020.

Alice, Interview (with Garance Clément and Fiona Del Puppo), Paris area (via Zoom), France, 2020.

Dalila, Interview (with Paule Perron and Fiona Del Puppo), Geneva, Switzerland, 2020.

Sylvie, Interview (with Paule Perron), Geneva (via Zoom), Switzerland, 2021.

Sophie, Interview (with Garance Clément and Fiona Del Puppo), Geneva area, Switzerland, 2020.

Pia, Interview (with Garance Clément and Fiona Del Puppo), Geneva, Switzerland, 2021.