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## domesticity transformed

By Lori A. Brown<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This project begins with an interest in the female space as active within the domestic sphere. It involves issues of place-making and hopes to understand both the processes leading to and consequences following the alteration and eventual elimination of such places within the home. Through the passage of time I began to decipher difference - differences of my childhood home. The temporality of these spaces fascinate me, how they have changed from a place created by my mother to one by my father, the spatial consequences of these changes, and ultimately how these alterations have affected my brother and my interactions with these spaces. Aware of certain transformations occurring with time, I eventually realized the feminine spaces and associations of my childhood home had been reclaimed, distorted, even erased. By displaying my own recent photographs of the house against others selected from our family archive, I am interested in revealing the passage of time and its effect on the spatial hierarchy of the house - specifically, the loss of the feminine. I believe that this loss, once captured, becomes a spatial potential that can be reclaimed.

Through the passage of time I began to decipher difference - differences of my childhood home. The temporality of these spaces fascinate me, how they have changed from a place created by my mother to one by my father, the spatial consequences of these changes, and ultimately how these changes have affected my brother and my interactions with our childhood home. Aware of certain transformations occurring within what I considered to be the female spaces, I eventually realized the feminine spaces of my childhood home had been transformed. This project begins with the understanding of female space as active within the domestic, involving issues of nurturance and place making and hopes to understand what happens when alteration and eventual elimination of such places within the domestic occurs.

### spatial constructions: the feminine

How is a space feminine? What allows this reading? In order to understand this, one must first look at conceptual spatial structures. In *Timaeus* Plato describes the universe and its inherent structure; an account in both divine and rational metaphysical principles. These binary oppositions he establishes will mark the character of thought: being and becoming, the intelligible and the sensible, the ideal and the material, the divine and the mortal. These oppositions may be understood as versions of the distinctions between the [perfect] world of reason and the [imperfect] material world. The distinctions between the intelligible [what Plato believes is unchanging, the world of Forms and Ideas] and the sensible [or visible, changing, becoming] are where further study will reveal what we refer to as the *feminine*. Plato refers to the transition between the imperfect to the perfect or from the Form to reality as *chora*.

The category of *chora* is generally understood as what enables this transition to occur. We come to understand it from what it is *not*. Plato cannot actually specify any particular properties or qualities. Participating in intelligibility yet distinct from it, *chora* is separate from the material world insofar as it is "invisible and formless"; *chora* is the

mother of all qualities, yet has none; it has the capacity to take on, to nurture, and to bring into existence other kinds of beings. *Chora* is impossible to characterize. In *Space, Time and Perversion* Elizabeth Grosz states the purpose of *chora* is “[n]ot to procreate or produce – this is the function of the father, the creator, god, the Forms – but to nurse, to support, surround, protect, incubate, to sort, or engender the worldly offspring of Forms. [The *chora*’s] function is a neutral, traceless production to speak indirectly of its creator without need to acknowledge its incubator.”<sup>2</sup> According to Greek collective fantasies, in procreation the father contributes all the specific characteristics to the nameless, formless incubation provided by the mother. Explicitly comparing the Forms to the role of the male and the *chora* to the role of the female, Plato states:

We may indeed use the metaphor of birth and compare the receptacle to the mother, the model to the father, and what they produce between them to their offspring; and we may notice that, if an imprint is to present a very complex appearance, the material on which it is to be stamped will not have been properly prepared unless it is devoid of all the characters which it is to receive. For if it were like any of the things that enter it, it would badly distort any impression of a contrary or entirely different nature when it receives it, as its own features would shine through.<sup>3</sup>

Plato designates *chora* as the space itself allowing the existence of material objects. As Grosz elaborates, *chora* is the space in which place is made possible. It is the chasm, the void, between the imperfect and the perfect. One can understand how the feminine, through Greek associations, is understood not only as an abstract representation of generic features [such as softness, nurturance, etc.] but also as a cultural identity, similar to the biological function of gestation.<sup>4</sup> So the in between space, the unnamable space, the nurturer... has been clearly associated with the feminine.

### **the feminine: my childhood home**

Built in the late 1960s, the house I grew up in is what is commonly referred to as a ranch-style house. It would be considered a typical suburban starter home from its time period with the typical front porch, living and dining room, kitchen with a utility room, three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a basement, and a carport. Our family only inhabited the main floor – the basement was used as a vast storage space. As far as I can remember, the use of the rooms in the house has always been the same: public spaces centered around the entrance of the house and the kitchen with the private spaces [bedrooms] at the back of the house, farther from the front door. The spaces I recall my mother occupying daily were the living room, kitchen, and the bedroom she shared with my father. Her realm, however, was the kitchen. She spent most of her time there: cooking, talking on the phone, or spending time with my brother and me. The kitchen was the center of our household and it was her domain. Because of my family’s domestic spatial dynamics growing up, an association exists for me between the spatial center of the house equaling the *female space* equaling the kitchen. They are mutually *inclusive* not exclusive as Plato has suggested. If I map my house, it would all be connected to this space. The kitchen is *the* female space. Or was the female space. This changes once my mother passes away.

### **female spaces: the kitchen**

In order to understand the temporal issues at play in the house, one must discuss how their spatial uses have transformed. Before my mother's death, the kitchen was a multi-use space. Obviously used for cooking and eating, it was also a social and commercial space. In order to earn additional money, my mother created and ran a baking business out of her kitchen. After her passing, the kitchen's primary uses changed. My father does not often cook, so it has become a place to eat breakfast and to heat leftovers.

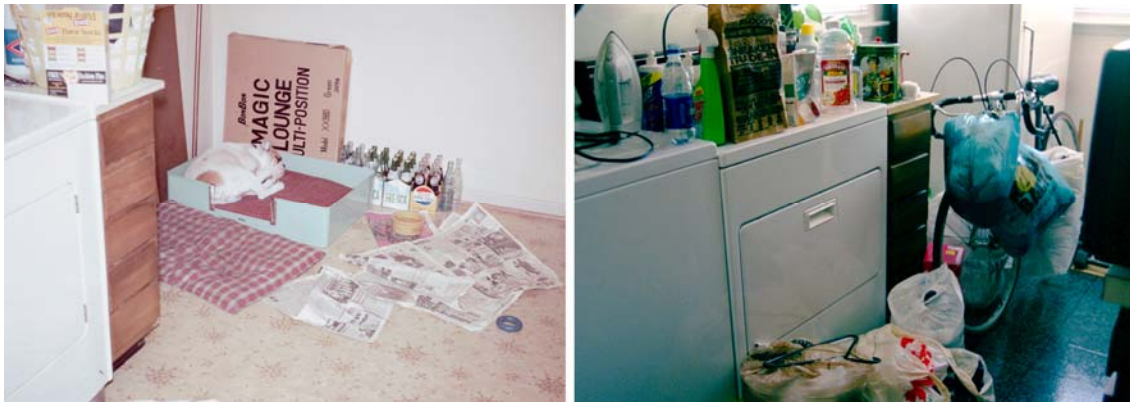
However the most fascinating aspect is the kitchen's transformation into a place used to collect random mail, plastic food containers, and other small items. Both the counter and table surfaces have become cluttered and packed with so many items that the spaces have been rendered unusable - now a showcase of my father's daily life. When the family is eating a meal together now, there is no longer a real sense of the event of the meal but instead it feels adhoc - moving and rearranging things on the table in order to create a space where we can all eat together. Not only does the collection of these unusable items occur in the kitchen, once the family's central space in the house, but it also occurs in the living room and the dining room, spaces adjacent to the kitchen. Spatially, my father has transformed his environment through the addition of items that inherently do not have much value; I mean value in the sense that they are essentially things he will eventually discard.



kitchen counter: family archive 1970s; 2002



kitchen table: family archive 1970s; 2002



utility room: family archive 1969; 2002

### **the bedroom**

Another space that has been altered over the course of time is my parent's bedroom. Once used by both my mother and father, the room has become another area for my father to collect and store things. And because few see it, there is a tendency for him to store even more here. The dresser is a good example. Once divided in half for each to use, my father now has stacks of papers all over it. One sees very little of the actual horizontal surface of the dresser because it is so covered with his mail. The most revealing space is the shared space of my parents' bed. The actual area where my mother once slept has been overtaken by mail and is now not able to be used. He has literally altered his environment to such a degree as to eliminate the space my mother once occupied.



parent's bedroom: family archive 1969; 2002

### **eliminated female spaces**

I believe the altering of one's space after a loved one passes is completely normal. Architecturally there are many ways to do this. However, what I find fascinating is how and with what my father has selected to do this with. He has not physically reconfigured the space: either by changing the furniture or use of the rooms. Instead, he has selected all temporary items – items that could be argued as neutral, meaningless, or recyclable. Are the objects he has selected to do this with important? I believe they are. They allow for this alteration but encourage the space to continually change – adding to or subtracting from. So in fact, this alteration can be changed yet again and again, reconfiguring in order to mask or fill a void left by my mother's passing. The spaces once associated with her and her daily activities are now no longer present but traces are left behind. For example, my mother was a saver of plastic containers to use for things such as leftovers. Unlike my father, she always put those things away once cleaned. Leaving the containers out on the counter, I am constantly reminded of her when I see them. Many of the spaces he has used to collect things act as similar signifiers. However my father has successfully altered the spaces to such a degree that these traces are no longer apparent to anyone other than my brother and myself.

Why has the female space been taken over? Relocated? Adjusted? One tries, either consciously or unconsciously, to create a space that is safe for oneself. In my father's case, he is trying to reconfigure and redefine ownership of one's self through one's space at the expense of the spatial memory of my mother. How does one set boundaries of safety? Why so temporal an alteration? What does this say about the intentions of the alterations? Maybe one could begin to answer these questions through the following: these alterations are not intended to be permanent and so therefore allow for easy modifications, adjustments, or changes. The project would like to consider how to reclaim these spaces and this first happens through the recognition of their absence.<sup>5</sup>

### **reclaiming**

*Everywhere you shut me in. Always you assign a place to me. Even outside the frame that I form with you...You set limits even to events that could happen with others...You mark out boundaries, draw lines, surround, enclose. Excising, cutting out. What is your fear? That you might lose your property. What remains is an empty frame. You cling to it, dead.*

Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*

Each of the following drawings is examining how domestic female space is 'normally' coded and exploring how our family, especially my father, altered the spaces thus changing how the feminine is spatially read.









A proposition for something else, something other, and something new can only be contemplated once it has been understood how and why the home has been altered. I would like to conclude with a quote from Luce Irigaray:

In order to make it possible to think through and live [sexual] difference, we must reconsider the whole problematic of *space* and *time*...The transition to a new age requires a change in our perception and conception of *space-time*, the *inhabiting of places* and of *containers*, or *envelopes of identity*.<sup>6</sup>

Irigaray believes that for an autonomous and independent self-representation for women and femininity, a reconceptualization of space and time must occur.<sup>7</sup> The collage drawings are the beginning of my explorations synthesizing observations with my desires for discovering the space Irigaray speaks of.

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion essays on the politics of bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 113-115.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 116.

<sup>5</sup> One of the roots of reclaim is *kel-* meaning to cover, conceal, save. This has some resonance for me. Not that I want to actually do those things specifically but there is something about saving the space of the woman or preventing it from being encroached upon. This is something I am working towards clarifying.

<sup>6</sup> Grosz, p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 120.

I would first like to thank my father for permission to pursue this project. It has been a difficult, lengthy, and rewarding process and without his support, it would not have been possible; Syracuse University School of Architecture for a faculty grant that helped defray the cost of exhibiting this project, and the Macdowell and Caldera Artists colonies where portions of this project have been discussed and worked on.