UNCONVENTIONAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING!

PROJECTS, PRACTICES, POLICIES

EDITED BY MADDALENA FLORIANA GRASSI,
VALENTINA NOVAK, FRANCESCA SERRAZANETTI,
CONSTANZE WOLFGRING

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RETHINKING DOMESTIC “SPACES OF CARE” FOR COLLABORATIVE AND AFFORDABLE LIVING

Introduction

With growing interest, attention is once again being turned toward the home as a means to ensure full rights to the city and its inhabitants. A solid body of research has already identified the causes of the current housing crisis. It is attributed both to a complex overarching framework of polycrises and to more specific and contextual social changes which, in Italy, include an increasingly aging population with diverse and intersecting vulnerabilities, greater territorial mobility, and family compositions no longer aligned with traditional models (Cognetti & Delera 2017; Lodi Rizzini 2013). Also converging is the focus on housing affordability – which links housing costs to income – as a lens through which to investigate the issue and attempt to ensure housing for those excluded from the market and ineligible for public housing (Bricocoli & Peverini 2023; Bricocoli *et al.* 2025).

Extending beyond practices and policies, the debate also engages design disciplines, which are called to question the concept of the *Existenzminimum*, which in the 1920s revolutionised social housing by offering “adequate space” to millions of people (Di Biagi 2001; Ortelli *et al.* 2019; Pesce & Postiglione 2024). The effort is now directed at reassessing some of the modernist principles to reconsider how domestic spaces can once again contribute to ensuring fundamental rights and reducing various inequalities reflected in space (Secchi 2013). The urgency of a paradigmatic shift in the concept of the “minimum habitable” must now translate into the search for spatial solutions capable

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of going beyond the home's interior, offering "opportunities to achieve a higher level of social quality" in terms of services, proximity-based relationships, and freedom of choice (Manzini 1994, p. 41).

From these premises, the aim of this contribution is to bring housing affordability into dialogue with domestic care. It specifically asks whether rethinking some traditionally care-oriented residential spaces – such as the kitchen – can help renew policies that support affordable and collaborative living, while also contributing to meaningful transformations of traditional housing models toward "maximum social quality". To articulate this hypothesis, some research strands that place care spaces at the centres of housing discourse and design will be briefly reviewed. Two case studies will help highlight key spatial and policy-related issues relevant to this discussion.

Roots and research fields

Looking again at the home as a field of research and design offers an opportunity to address inequalities exacerbated by the now well-recognised crisis of social reproduction and by the equally troubling trend toward the "commodification of care" (Saraceno 2022; Serughetti 2020a). Since the pandemic, the renewed attention toward care work (Serughetti 2020b) has led to a rethinking of the domestic "private" sphere and prompted design disciplines to explore residential models that are more open to contamination between private and collective life (Brysch 2019).

This interest is not new to the discipline but, as is well known, has deep roots in the history of architecture and urban planning, updating a legacy of experiments, studies, and research that go far back in time (Hayden 1982; Di Biagi 2016). Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, feminist research (from Dolores Hayden and Matrix Architects to Silvia Federici and Maria Mies) offered a critique that challenged the traditional single-family home model, identifying in its spatial patterns the origins of gender inequality and the exclusion of women from public life (Vestbro & Horelli 2012; Horelli 2013; Bassanini 2008; Andreola & Muzzonigro

2023). These studies interpret the right to domestic privacy as a disguise for biopolitical mechanisms, where the single-family home and its spaces become tools of control over bodies and their reproduction at the service of capitalism and neoliberalism. This control is also tied to the progressive disengagement of public policy from housing, and the consequent transfer of much of the welfare system's burden onto the family (Federici 2014; 2020; Aureli & Giudici 2020).

The kitchen has not been spared from analysis, understood as both a manifesto and synthesis of modernist research into the ideal measure of one of the key family care spaces. This critical reflection, on the one hand, led to a rediscovery of precursors to Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky (such as Catharine Beecher and Lillian Gilbreth, among others), and on the other, allowed for a critical re-reading of the revolution represented by the *Frankfurter Küche*, without diminishing its importance (De Vault 1991; Clarisse 2004; Vigneault 2024). In this critical stance, the reduction and optimisation of space are recognised as factors contributing to a process of "housewifisation" (Vigneault 2024, p. 8), which effectively confined women to a limited space, often poorly connected to other areas of the home. The progressive isolation of the kitchen – and its detachment from a "public dimension" – is questioned, with causes attributed to the commodification of food and the spread of lifestyles that drastically reduce time spent on food-related practices, severing them from local systems.

Within this complex theoretical framework is the recent resurgence of interest in collective living. Co-housing, in its many forms, has been once again praised as an "ideal-typical" solution to the pressing demand for "adequate living spaces" where care responsibilities are shared (Horelli 2020; Gresleri 2015; Bettini 2019). However, a more cautious approach encourages a critical reading of co-housing experiences to highlight the challenges they face in effectively responding to the crisis of social reproduction. Analyses that examine co-housing more closely bring to light a central issue in the relationship between home and reproductive labour: the negotiation of care work, which becomes difficult when such models lack policy integration (Chiodelli 2010; Bifulco 2011; Ledent & Salembier 2021). Without being

embedded in broader policy frameworks, shared living risks losing its transformative potential and becoming a "niche innovation" (Tummers & Mac Gregor 2019, p. 77). Beneficial only for a few, it fails to significantly impact the fair distribution of reproductive labour or address the "privilege of irresponsibility" identified by political scientist Joan Tronto (1990) – now widely recognised as a key issue in the effort to "politicise care" and use it as a resource to imagine alternatives to neoliberalism (Casalini 2020; Serughetti & Fano Morrisey 2022).

More convincing are the radical alternatives proposed by Dogma, where the sharing of certain spaces turns "the house into a sequence of areas where being alone or together can be constantly negotiated by its inhabitants" (Aureli & Tattara 2015). The re-approximation of domestic and work spaces enables democratic negotiation of care (Dogma 2022). The reorganisation of domestic environments creates opportunities to share reproductive activities and foster living models rooted in solidarity and mutual support (Aureli *et al.* 2019). Grounded in strong theoretical thought, these proposals urgently call to "repoliticise" the home: architecture becomes a medium to make both productive and reproductive work visible once more in a public and democratic forum.

Architect Anne Puigjaner (MAIO) focuses instead on repositioning the kitchen beyond domestic walls. Placed "in public", the kitchen becomes a space-device for extra-familial collaboration, already widely experimented with in ephemeral Japanese kitchens and Latin American *comedores populares o comunitarios* (Puigjaner 2019; MAIO 2023). Similar strategies of kitchen relocation can also be recognised in the examples of the food courts/hawkare centres in Singapore (Shee 2023). These experiences, she writes, "in highlighting the political dimension (and definition) of domestic space, remind us of the home's capacity to play a significant role in the development of the public sphere" (Puigjaner 2019). In short, the kitchen acts as a device for forming a domestic-urban collective infrastructure that promotes and sustains solidarity bonds born through food sharing.

These are not isolated developments. This body of research includes not only the better-known historical precedents (such

as Godin's *Familistère*) but also lesser-known or more recent initiatives. Among them are the research activities of the Gruppo Femminista Immagine, active in Varese between the 1970s and 1980s. Member Maria Grazia Sironi experimented with housing solutions to facilitate women's domestic labour, focusing on spatial form rather than function, designing single-family homes with kitchens that opened to the outside (Ferrario 2023; Vigneault 2024). Gruppo Vanda, founded at Politecnico di Milano in the 1990s, focused on the relationship between care spaces and the urban dimension. Care is understood as a practice that extends beyond the home's interior and instead engages with the complexity of urban space (Marinelli 2015; Bassanini 2008). Extending the concept of care to the city detaches it from a fate solely tied to women and redefines it as a design practice guided by an ethic of world-maintenance (Tronto 2013). These theoretical shifts underpin efforts to re-orient urban design practices toward a "city of care" (Davis 2022; Chincilla 2022). These reflections assume that spatial design has a clear responsibility in enabling both formal and informal care practices and in facilitating the meeting of needs – removing them from market dynamics.

Despite differing critical positions, these reflections all invite to a reconceptualisation of care as place-based (Davis 2022), adopting an approach that reassesses the generative potential of space and its capacity to support the agency of its inhabitants (Bifulco 2003). Within this framework, kitchens and food-related spaces play a decisive role, especially as the commodification of food-related domestic labour (e.g., reliance on pre-cooked meals, which feeds into global exploitation chains) is recognised as a clear consequence of neoliberal policies that re-privatise social reproduction (Casalini 2016; 2020). Juxtaposing the kitchen and care spaces with the issue of affordability allows for a deeper investigation into cooperative living[2] and the policies needed to support collaborative practices capable of making such housing truly affordable.

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2 For a review of selected cooperative housing models, see the Atlas of the research *UAH – Unconventional Affordable Housing* (UAH! Atlas 2025).

Issues and case studies

Building on the research fields briefly outlined above, this section aims to explore the relationship between affordability, care, and social reproduction by focusing on two central issues. The first concerns the assumption of democratic negotiation in care work that underlies many proposals for cooperative/collaborative housing. The key question is which social actors are actually able to autonomously manage such negotiations, and how welfare policies (particularly those relating to social reproduction) might support such models without reducing them to exclusive "niche innovations". The second issue pertains to spatial dimensions – specifically, which design strategies can foster innovative ecologies of cohabitation rooted in food-related care practices that extend beyond the private home, potentially articulating more complex infrastructures of care at the urban scale.

The analysis of case studies proves useful in shedding light on certain elements that may help address these issues, while also suggesting alternative spatial solutions. These are examples in which food-related spaces and practices – guided by different design frameworks – have either sparked or contributed to the spatialisation of housing policies that are inclusive, affordable, and innovative. At the same time, they offer concrete illustrations of how kitchens and spaces of care can be composed into broader urban infrastructures, potentially extending beyond domestic boundaries.

Care spaces for collaborative and solidarity-based living

"This is the path of the Simon de Cyrène Association" – so begins the story of an encounter between Évelyn and René, two elderly residents of Marseille, and the inhabitants of one of the Simon de Cyrène Association's homes, located across the street from their apartment[3]. In this residence, people with disabilities live together with individuals who choose to participate in an

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3 https://www.simondecyrene.org/2022/06/17/6759/ [10.06.2025].

"inclusive living" project supported by the French government[4]. From exchanging greetings from their respective windows to sharing a communal meal, the transition was natural. Évelyn and René were invited to join a moment of conviviality at the *Cabanon de Simon*: overlooking the street, the Cabanon functions simultaneously as a communal kitchen, a creative space, and a place for social gathering.

The Cabanon's transparent windows – designed by the renowned architectural collective Collectif Etc.[5] – offer a view into a modest space where the kitchen was built with the help of all the residents involved in the participatory construction workshop organised by the same collective. On one of the walls, a mural composed of wooden panels – convertible into tables when needed – depicts a communal dinner. The illustration, created by artist Élodie Lascar, celebrates the principle of *vivre ensemble fondé sur la relation fraternelle* ("living together based on fraternal relationships") that underpins the inclusive housing model promoted by Simon de Cyrène.

Three core elements define this project. The first two relate to the internal organisation of the residence. Each resident has access to a private apartment – approximately 30 square metres – that includes a kitchenette and a bathroom, ensuring housing independence and offering affordable accommodation in central urban areas. Affordability is ensured in exchange for a commitment to provide support to those in need living within the residence, providing help in their daily lives (preparing meals, accompanying them shopping, etc.) and, more generally, encouraging and supporting their autonomy. The real heart of inclusive living, however, lies in the communal kitchen, presented as the space that "facilitates time for encounters, exchange, and conviviality", and where solidarity toward individuals with disabilities, the elderly, or those in vulnerable situations is most strongly expressed.

The third distinguishing feature is the project's anchoring in neighbourhood life. The immediate surroundings of the Cabanon

4 See: https://www.pour-les-personnes-agees.gouv.fr/changer-de-logement/autres-solutions-de-logement/habitat-inclusif-un-chez-soi-et-une-vie-sociale-partages [10.06.2025].

5 http://www.collectifetc.com/realisation/le-cabanon-de-simon/ [10.06.2025].

– the sidewalk and residential street it faces – are often activated by food preparation and the lively sharing it entails. Without explicit architectural intention, the life of the Cabanon spills onto the street, infusing the neighbourhood with its imperfect yet vital daily rhythm, opening up to other residents eager to participate, like Évelyn and René. Indeed, proximity to the urban fabric is a key requirement of the government-supported *Habitat inclusif* model[6]: to foster autonomy, access to public transport, shops, and services is essential. Integration into neighbourhood life becomes crucial to sustaining and building social ties, precisely through relations of proximity.

Figure 1. Marseille, Le Cabanon de Simon in the solidarity housing residence developed by the Simon de Cyrène Association (Source: Collectif Etc).

6 Inclusive housing is primarily supported by public funding: those who promote inclusive housing developments – provided they meet the eligibility criteria – receive financial support granted by the Departmental Councils through a dedicated call for proposals (*Aide à la Vie Partagée* – AVP). Residents contribute to the project by paying a reduced rent, made possible through *Aides Personnalisées au Logement* (APL). In addition, persons with disabilities receive specific support through the *Prestation de Compensation du Handicap* (PCH). These different forms of assistance contribute–each to a varying degree–to the overall financial sustainability of the project: https://www.credofunding.fr/fr/simondecyrene-pret [10.06.2025].

Figure 2. Marseille, Le Cabanon facing the street (Source: Collectif Etc).

Care Spaces to Integrate Living and Working

Outdoor tables and transparent windows offer a view into the affordable neighbourhood restaurant: this is La Ferme du Rail in Paris[7], an agro-urban space where agricultural production, employment, social reintegration, and housing are woven into a collective lifestyle in harmony with nature. Winner of the "Reinventing Paris" initiative, launched in 2003 by the city government to repurpose underutilised urban areas, the project was developed by a multidisciplinary team – including social organisations, architects, and landscape designers – and combines a focus on social and environmental concerns with the provision of new housing forms.

La Ferme du Rail is an urban farm equipped with greenhouses, gardens, and areas for experimenting with permaculture, aquaponics, and sack-based cultivation. It employs about twenty people, and its residential component is tightly intertwined with urban

7 https://www.fermedurail.org/ [20.04.2025].

agriculture work. The site consists of two buildings. The first, facing the street, is dedicated to work-related functions. It houses greenhouses on the top floor; a workshop and garage on the lower, semi-underground level; and, on the intermediate level, an affordable restaurant. This restaurant opens onto the street and includes an outdoor area, forming a transitional space that welcomes visitors. The greenhouse above is entirely transparent, emphasising the lightness of a structure built with sustainable materials.

The second building is residential and includes both a shelter and job reintegration centre for vulnerable individuals (15 units), as well as five student apartments. Each floor includes a shared kitchenette. All residents participate in the operation and maintenance of the farm. The project serves significant social aims. Among the associations involved are Travail et Vie, which supports professional reintegration, and Bail pour Tous, which advocates for dignified, high-quality housing for people in need. Moreover, beneath the restaurant, the workshop hosts about twenty individuals undergoing job reintegration, along with students from the École du Breuil (École d'horticulture de la Ville de Paris) or the École des Ingénieurs de la Ville de Paris (EIVP).

Figure 3. Paris, *La Ferme du Rail*: the restaurant seen from the street (© Jéromine Derigny / Argos).

In this agro-urban system, private residential units and communal spaces are fully integrated. While shared areas foster interaction and community, private spaces ensure intimacy and autonomy. Biodiversity and sustainability are promoted through the use of diverse plant species in the outdoor spaces, reclaimed or low-maintenance materials, and closed-loop resource systems such as rainwater harvesting, reduced water consumption, and composting. Ecological building principles enhance the site’s architectural quality while also improving the everyday life of those who live and work there.

Partial conclusions, future perspectives

Returning to the questions posed at the beginning: what lessons can be learned from these case studies? What clues can help shape research paths toward collective and affordable living, beginning with the democratisation of care work and food-related social reproduction?

Lesson 1: Using food-care spaces to renew housing welfare

Recognising the centrality of care spaces, especially those related to food, can provide an opportunity to renew housing-related welfare. Sharing these spaces can be strategic not only for ensuring inclusion and sociality but also – and above all – to address growing vulnerabilities linked to food poverty, which is increasingly shown to affect housing quality (Seo & Park 2021). If the right to food is recognised as part of a broader sphere of citizenship rights (Rodotà 2014), then spaces for food preparation and consumption can play a decisive role in ensuring quality (social) housing. The case studies show that ensuring this right enables the identification of various social vulnerabilities and creates opportunities for social and work inclusion starting from the home. At the same time, assigning a central role in housing to the kitchen and food-sharing spaces provides a chance to consolidate a culture of sharing that transcends ethnicity, generations, identities, and gender – and serves as a solid foundation for truly

collaborative living. In these cases, care for relationships is at the heart of the project to democratise reproductive labor: the relationship between ourselves and others as a condition for social life and for making the world habitable (Simay 2022).

The first lesson is that the kitchen and food-related spaces can drive welfare renewal only if we move beyond the assumption that the right to housing simply equates to the right to a dwelling in contexts of social vulnerability. Breaking this binary correspondence means acknowledging the potential of shared care practices (and thus food practices) to create, through affordable housing, "communities of care": concrete utopias rooted in "necessary and situated solidarities", spatially embedded in ecologies with greater potential for everyday realisation (Serughetti & Fano Morrisey 2022; Haraway 2022). It is in this dimension that inhabitants – and women in particular – while "reimagining new ways of being together and building commons, invent new relational environments, re-establish new relationships between public and private spaces through novel forms of occupancy, and create different ways of participating in and self-managing social spaces" (Decandia 2019, p. 25).

Lesson 2: The kitchen as an opportunity to create "infrastructures of care"

But what role does space play in all this? And what kind of design can help support the described processes? In the examples cited, the focus is not so much on private space – which, even in collaborative housing, must be protected to guarantee individual intimacy and privacy. Rather, the design focus shifts to mediating spaces, to thresholds between shared areas and everything beyond, whether public or private. Physical accessibility to shared spaces proves fundamental (Bifulco 2003): in both the Cabanon and the Ferme du Rail, opening onto the street is essential for achieving a socially high-quality housing experience. In both cases, it is the kitchen that opens toward the city, offering the opportunity to connect the domestic and the urban through spaces where the boundaries between services and housing are blurred, generating hybrid and innovative spatialities open to wider collective use.

Breaking the invisibility of the kitchen is a necessary strategy, but even more crucial is the fine-grained design work aimed at reconfiguring the connecting spaces that mediate transitions between different living states (intimacy-sharing; individual-collective; collective-public). Designing thresholds ensures transitions between different degrees of sharing and can spark design invention – reconfiguring private interiors and imagining their variability over time based on the changing needs of their inhabitants.

Focusing on mediating spaces makes the process of re-collectivising care truly possible, restoring its visibility in the public sphere. As it becomes an "infrastructure of care" (Power & Mee 2020), the kitchen and other collaborative spaces provide fertile political and epistemic ground for linking care with social reproduction. Through policy, care and reproduction can find a dialogic and generative dimension in the collectivisation of kitchens and shared care spaces.

Lesson 3: The importance of intermediary actors in democratising care

The final lesson concerns the role of the actors involved. Democratic negotiation of care reaffirms the need for a strong public actor, capable of managing increasingly complex, multi-stakeholder processes. Now more than ever, we need bold and courageous public institutions – to re-balance the roles of involved parties, build alliances with private actors, and work within legal frameworks to experiment with innovative welfare models that generate new spatial anchors for democratically shared living.

But the presence of a public actor alone is not sufficient. The examined cases show that care negotiation also and especially depends on strong and capable intermediary actors – able, on the one hand, to manage the process of creating the spaces, and on the other, to ensure democratic sharing of care responsibilities without overly interfering with daily living. In France, for example, the *bailleur social* – a specialised social housing provider authorised to request subsidies and funding (comparable perhaps to Italian public housing entities

but more dynamic and diversified) – and the "care coordinator" emerge as key figures in guaranteeing the realisation of supportive and collaborative housing.

Catherine Clarisse (2004) reminds us that in optimising the kitchen "to save time, we lost space". Returning to the kitchen, in its many design iterations, now offers the chance to reclaim that space to recognise our interdependence with others, and to nurture relationships of solidarity in a reciprocal weave that sustains the fabric of our lives.

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