Rethinking Domestic Labour

The Post-Industrial Household Question

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There is no denying that the domestic realm is a site of labour. Yet, exactly what kind of labour it is that is performed in the household is in need of further analysis. Is it still the kind of labour referred to as housekeeping, housework or »householding« as we have come to know it over the course of the period commonly referred to as industrial capitalism? Or are there profound transformations underway? This essay raises the question of rethinking domestic labour using the example of the Dessau Masters’ Houses. What I am concerned with here might arguably more precisely be referred to as the post-industrial household question.

By now, we have an extensive body of critical scholarship and theoretical analysis on the effects of post-industrialisation with regard to the changing nature of the conditions of labour. There is an equally substantial body of critical work by architects and urbanists which not only aims to gain an understanding of what post-industrial architecture and urbanism are, should and could be, and, maybe even more importantly, what positive change the professions might be able to bring to the deep and troubling urban transformation wrought by the processes of post-industrialisation.

Yet, interestingly enough, even though post-industrial architecture and urbanism have harnessed a lot of attention in the research carried out by architects and urbanists and have also captured their future-oriented and problem-solving imagination, the same does not hold true for the post-industrial household. I would even go so far as to put forward the claim that the dramatically changing nature of the domestic realm, and more specifically the activities of the household, following in the wake of post-industrialisation is in fact conspicuously absent from most of the architectural and urban discourse, research, and practice. Therefore, the concept of the post-industrial household needs to be introduced and further developed in both architectural and urban terms.

Furthermore, I want to suggest here that the Dessau Masters’ Houses, known in architectural history as icons of modernity, offer in fact a very interesting and at the same time challenging conduit into rethinking the household in terms of post-industrialisation. Let me explain why. Looking at the Masters’ Houses today, 90 years after their completion, they reveal the domestic realm as a complex territory with regard to the logics and innovations of industrialisation. I am not so much referring here to the well-known and much written about industrialised methods of construction and the industrially produced, prefabricated building materials such as steel, glass, or reinforced concrete. Rather, I am drawing attention to how the Masters’ Houses demonstrate a reorganisation, redistribution, and reformulation of productive and reproductive labour performed in the domestic realm. On one hand, the Gropius House and all the other semi-detached houses which formed the Masters’ Houses ensemble and were shared, as follows, by the Bauhaus masters Moholy-Nagy/Feininger, Mache/Schlemmer, and Kandinsky/Klee, clearly manifest the rather small and hidden-away kitchen as a work place based upon the logics of Fordist industrialisation inside the domestic realm. Mechanisation, efficiency, and time saving measures were key to this reorganisation of the kitchen as an industrialised work space. On the other hand, the Dessau ensemble demonstrates via the generous and well-lit studio spaces, which were designed with the Bauhaus masters in mind, that the domestic realm allowed for creative, artistic, and intellectual work. The studio spaces reveal that the kind of work performed here was not thought of in terms of Fordist industrialisation, efficiency, and mechanisation. The studio was not reorganised as an industrialised work space. Quite on the contrary, the studio remained a pre-industrial space, or as we might think today, embodied a space already forecasting some of the processes of post-industrialisation. This leads me to propose here that the
design of the Masters’ Houses not only reinforced the gendered and classed division of labour in spatial terms. Much rather, what is revealed here, is the following paradox. With the kitchen we find a fully industrialised work space within the domestic realm. The kind of work done in the kitchen is, in Marxist terminology, referred to as reproductive labour. Reproductive labour, done mostly by women without receiving any payment for it or done by servants, most of the time also women, who are very poorly compensated, is very often still understood as having remained outside of the logics of industrialisation. With the studio we find a non-industrialised work space within the domestic realm. The kind of work done in the studio is referred to, to take up the terminology put forward by Maurizio Lazzarato, as immaterial labour. This kind of work was, and still continues to be, not understood as work associated with the domestic realm. What we have here in the spatial legacy of the Masters’ Houses is not only an affirmation of the widely known and well understood gendered, racialised and classed division of labour, but also the complex combination of a fully industrialised workplace of reproductive labour and a non-industrialised workplace of productive labour that together constitute the modern domestic realm. Starting from this division and combination of the kitchen and the studio reshaping the domestic realm of the Dessau Masters’ Houses I want to suggest a topical rethinking of domestic labour and the introduction of the post-industrial household question.

In historical terms, both the issue of reproductive labour and the notion of immaterial labour point towards the decade of the 1970s. Taken together, they importantly raise the question of what kinds of labour and what kinds of work are actually performed in the domestic realm. During the course of the 1970s, the old version of capitalism based upon industrial capitalism was gradually replaced by a new regime of more globalised, more flexibilised, and ultimately more accelerated capitalism. The extensive changes that transformed the Fordist logic of production into a post-Fordist logic of production as well as the end of the Bretton Woods Agreement in 1971 that since 1944 had tied the international monetary policy to a system of fixed exchange rates resulted in what Marxist geographer and social theorist David Harvey referred to as »flexible accumulation«. While these profound structural changes were underway, there were fierce debates on the issues of reproductive labour with its sharpest analysis put forward to date. In 1972, feminist activists and thinkers such as Selma James, Brigitte Galtier, Maria-rosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici started the International Wages for Housework Campaign. The territory of the household was introduced at once as a field for new feminist analysis and for political struggle. The labour commonly known as housework was finally understood to be fundamental for the performance of all other kinds of labour. The International Wages for Housework Campaign exposed the gendered and unpaid nature of this labour. In their 1975 article »Counter-Planning from the Kitchen« Nicole Six and Silvia Federici write:

»Since the left has accepted the wage as the dividing line between work and non-work, production and parasitism, potential power and absolute powerlessness, the enormous amount of wageless work women perform for capital within the home has totally escaped their analysis and strategy … the entire leftist tradition has agreed on the ›marginality‹ of housework to the reproduction of capital and, consequently, the marginality of the housewife to revolutionary struggle.«

What becomes obvious here is that the feminist social reproduction analysis was not so much only a critique of capitalism, but also included a critique of the left. It was in fact a most pronounced critique of the left’s ignorance or the left’s inability to see how the unpaid and un(der)valued housework was substantive for the reproduction
of life, both physically and emotionally, and ultimately all other waged work.

Ironically, their profound ignorance of the specific relation of women to capital they have translated into a theory of women's political backwardness which can only be overcome by our entering the factory gates. Thus, the logic of an analysis which sees women's oppression as their exclusion from capitalist relations inevitably results in a strategy for us to enter these relations, rather than destroy them. 6

In thinking back to the late 1920s when the kitchen, as we have learned from the Dessau Masters’ Houses, had become an, albeit spatially confined and well-hidden, Fordist workplace inside the household, it seems to be almost paradoxical that this place of unpaid work remained unidentified as a territory for political analysis and struggle for so long. One might think that the far-reaching efforts of industrialising and mechanising the kitchen had actually made, at least in spatial terms, understood the substantive labour performed in the domestic realm. Yet it seems that the efforts of making housework less demanding or less time-consuming were either geared towards freeing up women’s time to perform paid labour outside the home or towards alleviating what was referred to as women’s double burden or the second shift. Yet, only in the 1970s »wages for housework« was developed as »a political perspective«. Interestingly enough the radical feminist exposure of this »hidden work« happened at a time when, as I stated before, foundational changes within capitalism were underway and the regime of industrialised labour was about to expand Fordist labour regimes towards post-Fordist labour regimes. So, the factory gates were about to open for a new dimension of globalised and flexibilised labour, and the domestic territory was about to change into a site of capitalist production’s expansion as well as an equally globalised site of work with regard to what has been called transnational care chains.

The decade that witnessed the 1971 ending of the Bretton Woods Arrangement and the 1972 founding of the International Wages for Housework Campaign was described by Maurizio Lazzarato as follows:

»The »great transformation« that began at the start of the 1970s has changed the very terms in which the question is posed … The old dichotomy between »mental and manual labor,« or between »material labor and immaterial labor,« risks failing to grasp the new nature of productive activity, which takes this separation on board and transforms it.« 9

We see here the emergence of a new kind of labour that no longer starts with the opening of the factory gates and no longer ends with the closing of the factory gates. Lazzarato analyses here a kind of productive activity that was to significantly expand and alter capitalism’s reach into spheres previously believed to remain outside. »The concept of immaterial labor refers to two different aspects of labor,« according to Lazzarato. He argues that firstly »in industrial and tertiary sectors« labour involves more and more »cybernetics and computer control«. Secondly, he states that »Immaterial labor involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as »work« – in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion. Once the privileged domain of the bourgeoisie and its children, these activities have since the end of the 1970s become the domain of what we have come to define as »mass intellectuality«. 

It is the second aspect of the concept of immaterial labour as described by Lazzarato that interests me here with regard to the different kinds of labours performed in the domestic realm. Returning once more to the late 1920s and the Dessau Masters’ Houses I now want to draw the attention to the studio as a work space inside the household. Unlike the kitchen, which was tucked
away and well-hidden, the studio spaces took centre stage in the Masters’ Houses. All the more it is of interest that the studio that was, in spatial terms, a key element of these architectural icons of modernity has so far not received sufficient theoretical attention when it comes to what they mean for the reorganisation and redefinition of the domestic realm. Again, it seems almost paradoxical that hidden in plain sight in the Masters’ Houses there is the centrally located and most generous studio, a non-industrialised, non-Fordist domestic work space.

This is why, as I have put forward at the beginning of this essay, the Masters’ Houses are a most interesting site for rethinking domestic labours and for raising the post-industrial household question. Taken together, the kitchen and the studio, embody significantly the two kinds of labour that have been critically analysed by feminist Marxist labour theorists and by the proponents of immaterial labour theory. Both, the site of what is conventionally understood to be reproductive labour, the kitchen, and the site of what is conventionally understood to be productive labour, the studio, are located in the domestic realm of the Masters’ Houses. This proves crucial when it comes to rethinking domestic labour. It is here, located in the iconic examples of modernism, that we find an outline of the postindustrial household issue. The expansion of the household to provide a widely visible studio space to both accommodate and expose an intellectual non-Fordist worker and the industrial mechanisation of the tucked-away kitchen to both accommodate and hide the domestic Fordist worker, significantly raises, in spatial terms, the dichotomy between work and labour, unpaid and paid labour, reproductive and productive labour, “mental and manual labor,” or between “material labor and immaterial labor”. The postindustrial household question of both combining and separating “kitchen” and “studio” or, put differently, reproductive and productive labour, is preconfigured in spatial terms in the modernist, homes of the bourgeois Masters’ Houses. By way of concluding this essay, I will turn to my personal experience of combining “kitchen” and “studio” and what this might tell us about the arrival of the postindustrial household. For almost 30 years now I have been working at home. Or, put differently, I have been working from home. I perform domestic labour, and I work at/from home. In the terminology of Engels and Marx I have to perform reproductive labour recreating my capacity to work, and I have to perform productive or value-creating work. To me, labour and work have not become inseparable, but they combine in ways I have learned to both appreciate and be weary of. Over the years, I have become an expert at ignoring some of the housework actually in need to be done in order to work most productively at home. At other times, I use doing housework to actually think through from the perspective of this different manual activity my other work, which paradoxically I still consider to be my actual work. While I stir the lentils that are slowly cooking in a pot together with onions, garlic, curcuma, cumin, ginger, coconut milk and water, I think about this essay. I have stirred many, many, many other meals and thought about many, many, many other essays. While I take the clothes out of the washing machine which is in the bathroom and carry them to the drier which is at the other end of the apartment where I live with my family, I think about the e-mails I have to write to collaborators, editors, colleagues or students. The e-mails continue to be composed in my head, while I try to fish out all the things that cannot go into the drier as they would shrink and therefore need to be hung up. While I make another one of those futile attempts at sorting countless black socks that come in all kinds of slightly different lengths and sizes, I think about the lecture I have to give by the end of the week.

What sounds like a smooth combination of reproductive and productive labour has actually taken me years of practice. It also
involved a number of conscious decisions. Early on, I decided that I would never ever become a housewife, i.e. a woman who gets married, has children and whose sole occupation is the housework for her family. Being a female teenager in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period in time now referred to as the former West, housewifery definitely was not an option. It did not sit well with the strongly felt reverberations of second wave feminism. More than a clearly articulated radical feminist political agenda, a general feeling of women's liberation surrounded my teenage years. Therefore, as I understood it then, women had to leave the household and its chores behind. In order to be liberated, women had to leave behind the confining domestic space that hampered their intellect, their creativity and ultimately their freedom. When leaving my parents’ home, I took three decisions that continue to define my relations to the domestic realm. I said, as I mentioned before, no to housewifery. I also decided that I would never have another person perform domestic labour as a paid labourer for me. I felt more than I knew that washing my dishes, cooking my food, cleaning up after myself, taking out my garbage were activities not to be delegated to someone who would end up being badly paid to do them. Again, at the time, this was more informed by a sense of what is the right thing to do than by rigorous study of feminist literature or black feminist theories or political economy and labour theories. 14 I also decided that I would not chain myself to the kind of waged work that would require me to get up early in the morning, to leave my home, to go to a place specifically designed to perform a type of work measured in hours present at this very designated place in order to earn the money necessary to survive. These three decisions taken together – no to housewifery, no to having a maid, no to waged labour – paradoxically, opened up the home, a space contaminated by the longstanding histories and powerful ideologies of a gendered division of labour, as a site of redefining the relation between labour and work. It was this personal desire to escape a set of interlocking restrictions and dependencies that led me to search for a different understanding of what the domestic realm with its division of productive and reproductive labour and its historically shaped and socially defined spaces could become. Over the years of working at/from home, I have witnessed the division of labour become more brutal. I came to understand that the classed and racial division of reproductive labor 15 went global and is now in fact an international division of reproductive labor. 16 The domestic realm has become a site of growing global exploitation and increasing inequality.

I also came to understand from my personal experiences that the apartments I have so far inhabited were not in fact made to allow for a good or even smooth combination of the kitchen and the studio. The apartments required me to adapt them according to my needs, or, which of course is always the easier way out, I had to adapt my needs to the given spaces. Over the years, my desk, much to the chagrin of my family, has become mobile. My desk has shrunk to my laptop which can appear on any given surface, in fact, in any location of my home. And, the material traces of my productive labour, my books and my papers have invaded all kinds spaces of our family apartment. To me personally, the domestic realm has remained a test site for combining reproductive and productive labour, for living and working. On a professional level, as a curator and writer dealing with architecture, art, feminism and urbanism, I find that the postindustrial household question and the kinds of labours performed in the domestic realm are in much need of further architectural and spatial exploration. The contours of the question of how the kitchen and the studio can coexist, and potentially even coproduce differently was already prefigured in the Dessau Masters’ Houses. Yet, much further work remains to be done to come to architectural and spatial terms with the postindustrial household question.
A New Domestic Revolution


3 Pier Vittorio Aureli’s architectural practice, who together with Martino Tattara founded Dogma in 2002, points towards the issue of postindustrial household question. The Realism Working Group and Dogma realised a contribution to the Wohnungfrage cross-disciplinary program and exhibition, curated by Jesko Fezer, Nikolaus Hirsch, Wilfried Kuehn and Hila Peleg, at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. Their Communal Villa: Production and Reproduction in Artists’ Housing makes «an effort not to rigidly separate ›work‹ from ›labor‹.» Jesko Fezer et al., eds., Wohnungfrage (exhibition guide) (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, and Leipzig: Spector Books, 2015). Yet again, as we have also come to understand from the analysis of the kitchen and the studio in the Dessau Masters’ Houses, the gendered, racialised, and classed division of labour and work is not fully and critically addressed in architectural and spatial terms.


6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.: 3.

8 Ibid.: 4.


10 Ibid.: 133.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.
Bell hooks have importantly drawn attention to the racialised division of reproductive labour within feminism. In her critique of Betty Friedan’s 1963 Feminist Mystique, hooks writes the following: “She did not discuss who would be called in to take care of the children and maintain the home if more women like herself were freed from their house labor and given equal access with white men to professions. She did not speak of the needs of women without men, without children, without homes. She ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor women. She did not tell readers whether it was more fulfilling to be a maid, a babysitter, a factory worker, a clerk, or a prostitute, than to be a leisure class housewife.” Bell hooks, Feminist Theory from Margin to Center (Cambridge: South End Press, 1984): 10. Since then, the global division of labour has extensively made the domestic realm a site of rising inequality, underpaid domestic labour and new forms of dependencies and exploitation. See: Binna Choi and Maiko Tanaka (eds.), Grand Domestic Revolution (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2014); Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy (New York: Holt, 2004); Evelin Nakano Glenn, Forced to Care: Coercion and Caregiving in America (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012); Territorio Domestico, http://territoriodomestico.net (last accessed February 8, 2016); Gabriele Winker, Care Revolution (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015); Nicola Yeates, Globalized Care Economies and Migrant Workers: Explorations in Global Care Chains (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).


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The fair, which goes back to an initial concept developed by Philipp Oswalt, was accompanied by symposia, informal meetings, walking tours, and also the International Summit on Domestic Affairs. The international artistic, scientific, and creative contributions to this book have come about from a long-term process of analysing the discourses and practices of housekeeping and budgeting during and after the modern era.

Young designers, scientists, and curators researched the ideas based on, and the practices of storage and cleaning in the modern era within the framework of educational programmes such as »Bauhaus Lab 2014 – In Reserve: Concerning the Architecture of the Reservoir« and »Bauhaus Lab 2015 – Cracks in the Curtain Wall«.

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