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An Autonomous Form for the Labour of Love

Sara Davin Omar

A Note on the Political Visibility of Reproductive Labour in the Karl Marx Hof.

Throughout history to the present day, women worldwide perform the largest part of the work of maintaining daily life, also referred to as «the labour of love». In the majority of the ubiquitous housing types of the western world, spaces for this unpaid, reproductive labour have been assimilated to the private realm of the nuclear family. These spaces, such as kitchens and bathrooms, seem like decisive components of domesticity. Conversely, spaces for productive labour that humans are equally dependent on, were removed from the domestic scheme. Since industrialization, private dwelling units were designed to accommodate an ever-increasing amount of equipment understood as crucial to this notion of domesticity: the various appliances for cooking, cleaning and laundry. This way, the modern architecture of the welfare state consolidated the position of women within the capitalist system by placing them alone in their kitchens. Yet, elements suggesting a less conventional relation between domesticity, space for reproductive labour and the city can be found in architecture of the very same era.

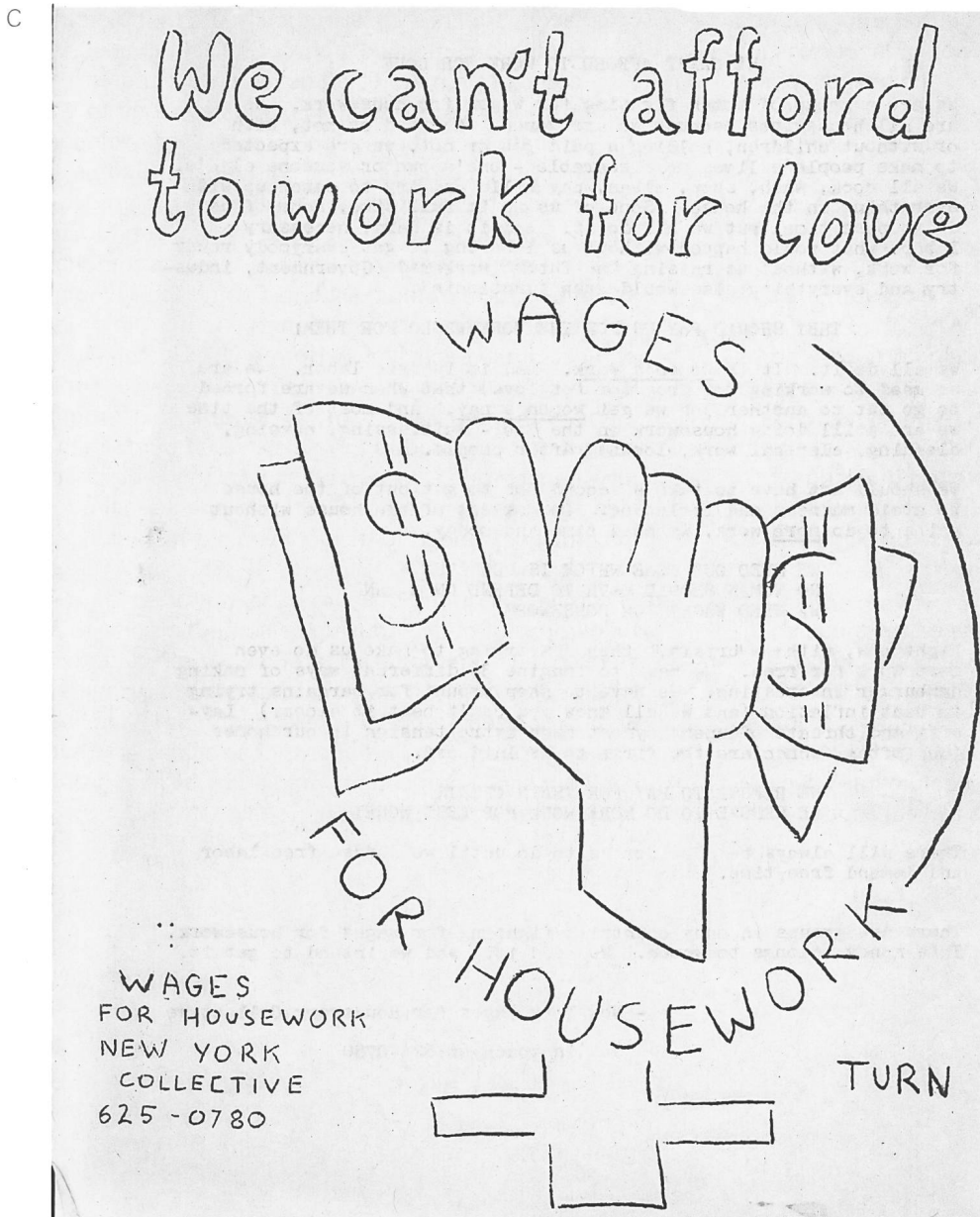
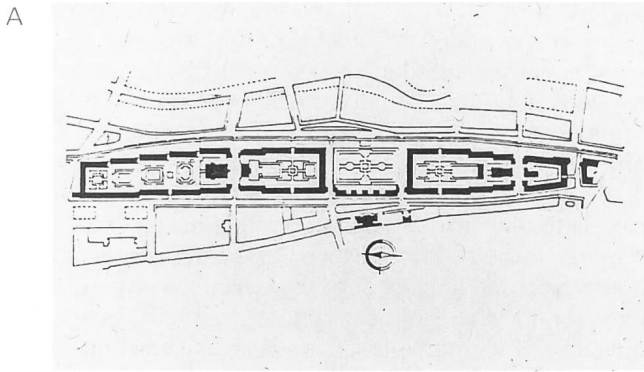
The Karl Max Hof is known as the central monument of the municipal housing programme of Red Vienna which was the nickname of the Austrian capital when it was governed by Social Democrats between 1918 and 1934. Completed in 1930, the building complex drawn by Karl Ehn is broadly known for its implications on the urban scale as a result of its immensity. With a total area of almost 160 000 square meters and a front façade measuring 1.2 kilometers, it housed a population of around 5000 people. The urban form of the Karl Marx Hof was organized as a hybrid of the classical perimeter blocks and the «Zeilbauten», which meant that the public space of the streets was brought into the courtyard and traditionally private space of the court. This inverted the classical fortress-like block of the Central European city and resulted in hybrid courtyard spaces that were equally part of the city and of the communal space of the dwellers of the housing blocks.⁽¹⁾

Confronting this semi-public realm of the courtyards, freely standing service buildings containing facilities for laundry, bathing as well as childcare are to be found. Seemingly trivial, their existence on the courts of the complex imply a notion of domesticity countering its prevailing relation with reproductive labour. In order to

understand this, it is relevant to elaborate on labour's basic notions. In Marxist economic analysis, production is any work performed as an exchange of a wage. Reproductive labour, on the other hand, maintains daily life and is associated with domestic housework including cleaning, cooking and childcare.⁽²⁾ This division between productive and reproductive labour is emphasized by Marxist feminists, pointing out that while productive labour results in goods or services with a monetary value in the capitalist system and are thus to be compensated in the form of a wage, reproductive labour is associated with the private sphere and involves anything which people have to do for themselves that is not for the purpose of receiving a wage.⁽³⁾ Even though productive labour is fully dependent on reproductive labour, a mechanism of capitalism has been to make reproduction a private aspect of family life in order to not compensate for it. In other words, only productive work in the workplace was remunerated with a wage, while reproduction remained a hidden affair. For this reason, the family home became an apparatus that naturalized reproductive labour and confined women to its sphere.⁽⁴⁾

The movements of communitarian socialism that emerged due to the rise of capitalism initiated the reflection on externalizing reproductive labour from the realm of the family.⁽⁵⁾ Influenced by these ideas, the «Salario al Lavoro» movement was founded 1974 in Italy. Spreading worldwide as the «Wages for Housework» campaign, its members urged reproductive labour to be recognized in society and remunerated as an emancipatory act. Marxist and feminist Silvia Federici was one of its originators and declared this labour «the labour of love» since women are expected to engage for their family exactly by performing this type of care-taking labour for free.⁽⁶⁾

Reverberating the essentially middle-class values of the Social Democratic Party in Austria, it is obvious that the built housing blocks of the Red Vienna project were far from reformulating the relation between space for reproductive labour and the dwelling. As highlighted by Eve Blau in her extensive documentations on Red Vienna, neither the architects behind the Viennese project or the German «Siedlungen» questioned traditional gender roles or opposed the division of labour in the home that assigned reproductive labour



A Figure ground plan of the Karl Marx Hof revealing the individualized form and central placement of the service facilities. Image: Courtesy of Karl Ehn

C Courtyards of the Karl Marx Hof with the pavilion in the middle. The small, circular pavilion in front belonged to Vienna's public park authorities. Image: Courtesy of Das Rote Wien im Waschsalon

B Flyer by the «New York Wages for Housework Committee», around 1974. Image: Courtesy of Silvia Federici Papers, Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women, Brown University

to women. A key component of the new Viennese proletarian dwelling was the custom-tailored «Wohnküche», a combined living room and kitchen. It was not a new feature, but a characteristic element also of the traditional working-class home, implemented to bind the recent proletarian buildings to their 19th century counterpart. The modernization of the traditional «Wohnküche» involved equipping it with a gas stove and internal water supply. By reorganizing it, the goal was both to make efficient use of the space and to make the kitchen less labour-intensive to operate.⁽⁷⁾ After influences from Frankfurt and Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, the «Wohnküche» was replaced by a working kitchen or «Arbeitsküche» and a separate living room in 1927.⁽⁸⁾ In both variants, new technology was exalted by the belief that it would relieve the housewife from domestic labour. However, it was neither implemented in a way that would shatter the division of labour based on gender nor relocate its locus out of the private sphere.

Already during the time of its construction, the typological solutions of Red Vienna were criticized, but more for their bourgeois «Wohnkultur». Austrian Socialist architects such as Franz Schuster, Franz Schacherl and Josef Frank pinpointed the lack of a coherent concept of the new proletarian dwellings regarding both their theoretical stance and its typology. While the Red Vienna was successful in eradicating the long corridors and insanitary, shared lavatories of the 19th century typologies, it implemented the enfilade in many of its apartments. Originating from baroque palaces, it was a common way to organize space in aristocrat dwellings.⁽⁹⁾ For Frank, this was nothing more than the embourgeoisement of traditional working-class dwelling space and domestic habits.

Beyond the conventional apartments with various configurations of kitchen, living room, bedroom and bathroom, the service pavilions of the Karl Marx Hof containing laundry, bathing and childcare facilities suggest a quite different conception of the spaces for reproductive labour. In his lecture «Can Architecture be Political?», Pier Vittorio Aureli argues that one radical aspect of the

Karl Marx Hof in particular and the Red Vienna project in general concerns the fact that domestic space was monumentalized in order to politicize housing. The aim was not only a solution to the housing shortage but a possibility of class representation within the city. The intention was not to replace the existing bourgeois city with a completely new design but to create a tension with the surrounding perimeter blocks.⁽¹⁰⁾ I would argue that the service pavilions of the semi-public courtyards operate in a similar way. Just as the buildings of Karl Marx Hof helped politicize the housing question by its mere presence within the existing city, the form, position and programmatic composition of the pavilions result in a political visibility of reproductive labour.

The semi-public courtyards in which these facilities are placed, are entered from the streets that pierce the building via amplified arches. Crossing the courtyard, they connect with major roads leading to the city center. The two-story pavilions, one dedicated to laundry and bathing and one for childcare, are positioned in front of each other, aligning to the penetrating street. Visible from the balconies and rooms of the private dwelling units of the housing complex, reproductive labour is monumentalized through the autonomous, ascending form of the pavilions. Even if this layout did not present a thorough solution to counter the problem of these unpaid activities performed by women, «the labour of love» was at least made visible by its confrontation with the urban realm. Its honorary placement cannot be compared to the dwellings of our contemporary, neoliberal era, where spaces for this type of activities again seem incorporated to the private realm, or maximally extended to its inconvenient residual space.

This observation might seem banal but offers a powerful glimpse of public housing as something else than stacked, self-referential apparatuses of reproductive labour. Conversely, if they are understood as private units organized around an area of communal facilities that confront the city around it, possibilities are that we can conceive a domesticity marked by a more communitarian and equal division of unpaid labour.