

### The Cultural Construction of the Domestic Space in France: Women's Lived Experience and the Materialization of Customs

Forlini, Francesca Romana

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Forlini, F. R. (2024). The Cultural Construction of the Domestic Space in France: Women's Lived Experience and the Materialization of Customs. *Urban Planning*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.7753>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

# The Cultural Construction of the Domestic Space in France: Women's Lived Experience and the Materialization of Customs

Francesca Romana Forlini 

Architecture and Design, New York Institute of Technology, USA

**Correspondence:** Francesca Romana Forlini ([fforlini@nyit.edu](mailto:fforlini@nyit.edu))

**Submitted:** 29 October 2023 **Accepted:** 14 January 2024 **Published:** 15 April 2024

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Housing Norms and Standards: The Design of Everyday Life” edited by Sam Jacoby (Royal College of Art) and Seyithan Özer (Royal College of Art), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.i316>

## Abstract

This article explores the intersecting processes of construction of the home, social, and individual identities through domestic practices inside French housing. It examines the design and occupation of French homes as crucial moments for the consolidation of subjectivities, beliefs, and ideologies manifested through daily actions that are influenced by normative cultural systems. In specific, it looks at codified domestic behaviours and their aesthetic dimension, focusing on how the French “art of living” has influenced taste, design, appropriation, and decoration of domestic interiors. Architectural treatises along with etiquette manuals are analysed as they both represent—through the written word and architectural drawings—cultural and gender stereotypes as well as societal norms and expectations that inform housing design and domestic practices. These documents directly assist in the cultural construction of the domestic space, uncovering mechanisms of reproduction and representation that inform the use and design of residential architecture. By focusing on women’s lived experiences, this research looks at the consolidation of feminine domestic cultures and how they fostered small-scale physical transformations of dwellings’ interiors through daily negotiations that define self-identity and interpersonal power relations. These dynamics are referred to as “cultural domesticity.” The latter frames this study along with feminist literature, situating women’s contribution to the aesthetic and spatial development of French apartments. What emerges from this study is that the French state historically exercised a regulatory power that impacted daily life and housing design.

## Keywords

culture; decoration; domesticity; dwelling; feminism; France; gender; home; interior; women

## 1. Introduction

The universe of everyday life in France is studded with words that ennoble or codify the most banal of everyday actions; for instance, the expression “way of life”—which refers to the habits, customs, and beliefs that characterise the way of conducting one’s existence—in French translates as *art de vivre* (the art of living). The idea that common actions such as dressing, eating, and conversing can acquire artistic status has served to reinforce social hierarchies and regulate social conduct throughout the centuries. Manuals, books, and guides of all sorts proliferated in bookstores and homes to instruct on the best ways to behave in all circumstances. Manners, customs, pleasantries, and celebrations represented, therefore, nothing but a strict system of social norms that seem to be embellished under the false promise of a life worthy of being exhibited as an artwork.

This article focuses on the typically feminine and highly codified practice, still very important in French culture, of receiving guests at home. What makes this particularly relevant to this study is the unique relationship between reception practices and the interior disposition of French homes, which is exceptionally legible in this context. This is evident from a wide range of manuals and treatises on the series of gestural, spatial, and design aspects linked to receiving guests.

One can trace the origins of the culture of reception to the great royal courts of the seventeenth century. There, etiquette laws were consolidated along with the centralised power of the king and, at the same time, the reception process was formalised and materialised in the enfilade spaces of aristocratic estates. The most important aspect of this study, however, concerns its development first within the domestic spaces of the French bourgeoisie and later in that of the middle class. This class-based approach relies on the theory of Bourdieu, who studied the mechanisms of social and class reproduction through symbolic domination at the cultural and social levels and, specifically, through the exercise of taste (Bourdieu, 1979). Good taste is, indeed, the prerogative of the upper classes, the custodians of high culture, and is instrumental for the consolidation of social and class distinctions.

These distinctions are not just class-related but also gendered. In her research on feminine taste, Sparke (2010) has clarified the masculine qualities of modernist good taste and its symbolic domination through high culture. Notably, taste reinforces distinctions between social classes and excludes both the working class and women. These mechanisms of exclusion are materialised in the domestic space and condition not only aesthetic choices made inside French homes but also mundane behaviours and the use and disposition of domestic interiors. The middle-class apartment encapsulates these dynamics as taste, along with the codification of practices and the gendered distinction of domestic spheres, not only has a strong gendered and aesthetic component but also clear spatial implications.

This study thence looks at the codification of spaces and actions in French domestic interiors, focusing on the dwellings’ reception spaces: the living room and—somewhat surprisingly—the bedroom, two rooms often adjacent in France. Both spaces will be analysed in detail integrating Eleb’s (1990) extensive research on the subject. This is joined by a more detailed study of the double bed, a piece of furniture that not only summarises the public character of the bedroom—mainly thanks to its style, decoration, and position—but also helped reconstruct the evolution of families’ affective systems and relationships. Since both the spatial and performative aspects have been extensively codified and normalised in France, especially in the second

half of the twentieth century, it was possible to trace their corresponding, mutual evolution. What characterises the French context is the unconscious conformity—both of inhabitants and architects—to these spatial, distributive, and social norms.

As previously mentioned, the research's methodology derives from Bourdieu's book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979). Specifically, his notion of habitus reconciles the objective structure—or institutionalised frame—of the architectural plan with the subjective dimension of appropriation and enculturation (Forlini, 2024). A series of mixed research methods—typological, historiographical, and comparative—lay down the basis for the interdisciplinary approach of this study that is complemented by, but also integrates, existing feminist and sociological theory. In other words, typological analysis underpins the hypothesis that habitus has spatial implications that can be read in dwelling plans. The combination of methodology and methods drives this research's spatial analysis of feminine domestic cultures and practices. This provides new insights into the relationship between the user and architectural space by specifically combining Bourdieu's sociological, structuralist framework and feminism with an architectural design study, expanding both views on the construction of subjective identity (subjective structures) as it is tightly connected to architectural space (objective structures), and domestic interiors specifically.

This study specifically focuses on the multi-faceted relationship between the internal distribution of dwellings and the daily practices that unfold within them from a critical, feminist standpoint, highlighting women's lived experience in the domestic sphere. Thus, on the one hand, this study focuses on the role that women play as homemakers; on the other, it examines the spatial and design implications of women's domestic practices and cultures, which are becoming more individualised and, therefore, play a substantial role in contemporary domesticity.

“Cultural domesticity” is the interdisciplinary, theoretical, and analytical lens advanced in this analysis aimed at studying female domesticity, spatial design, and culture. In specific, it describes gendered domestic cultures, clarifies the specific typological focus of this research, and exemplifies the cultural dimension of this study. Culture plays a transversal role across all levels of analysis brought forward in this research. Cultural sociology clarifies that self- and class-making are determined by culture, including gender identity (Adkins & Skeggs, 2005). Culture determines how people construct their self-identities, see, and orient themselves in both the social and physical space. The inevitable interaction with it—itself an act of design—generates new cultures.

This article thus focuses on the feminine dimension of domestic culture in France, a Western country where the two spheres (the domestic and the feminine) have been historically joined. From this analysis, it emerges that the oppressive, hetero-patriarchal, and architectural framework that historically trapped women into the home became the ground of resistance that in turn shaped women's self-identity. Bourdieu's (1979) theory integrated by the feminist reading of Skeggs and Adkins (2005) supports the argument that it is precisely within the objective structures (of national culture, patriarchy, class, economy, and the dwelling's layout) that framed women's personal experience and trapped them inside (reassuring) stereotypes that women found ways to express themselves (Forlini, 2024). Feminine domestic culture is, indeed, based on the reworking of objective structures, which are oftentimes patriarchal and normative (Forlini, 2024).

The implications of cultural domesticity that emerge from this study are threefold. First of all, the cultural and spatial relevance of daily actions and individual occupation of architectural space is hereby recognized

and, consequently, cultural domesticity elevates ordinary female actions in the home by arguing that they are culturally and aesthetically valid. Secondly, it proposes a critique of the traditional aesthetic values of art and architectural historians, values that have so far pushed feminine taste and the decoration of domestic interiors to the margins, branding them as “kitsch” (Sparke, 2010, pp. XXIV–XXV). Finally, it proposes a unitary feminist theoretical framework for the study of the occupation and design of the domestic space that includes the spatial and decorative alterations made by the inhabitants, considered worthy of further study.

## 2. The Materialization of Customs

### 2.1. *Savoir-Vivre*

To learn and perform the art of living, the French have been historically expected to master *savoir-vivre* (literally translated as “knowing how to live,” or “good manners”). *Savoir-vivre* was first theorised in the nineteenth century and circulated among the members of the bourgeoisie in the form of small books (Figure 1). These manuals were first a peculiarity of the upper classes, but later became popular among the middle class. They covered any aspect of daily life, suggesting the perfect way to approach strangers, setting up the table, writing a letter, welcoming guests, and so on. Most notably, these books were meant to instruct individuals how to behave in every aspect of social life through codified and ritualised practices, with the legitimisation of good manners adopted from the high bourgeoisie that held political power. This also had spatial implications, as each practice was strictly associated with the spaces in which it was performed.

A chapter on “the visit” is present in every manual, from the earliest examples to the most recent ones, which also looks at today’s popular aperitifs (Figure 1). Some of these reception practices and guides were even republished in encyclopedias (Figure 2). Figure 2 precisely illustrates some of the important behavioural codes that were to be adopted during a visit. Each image portrays guests and hosts having conversations, both in the salons and bedrooms, with one caption explaining the importance a good conversation plays during the visit (although the conversation should not last for too long; Figure 2, first illustration): “Politeness has fixed rigorous terms for some visits, not conforming to them means to lack of *savoir-vivre*” (Clément, 1879, p. 131).

Each action codified in the books on *savoir-vivre* did not detach itself from the unspoken code of “etiquette” that regulated social interaction among the wealthy classes of French society (Martin, 1993). Although each social class had access to its *savoir-vivre* book, etiquette was almost exclusive to the upper classes.

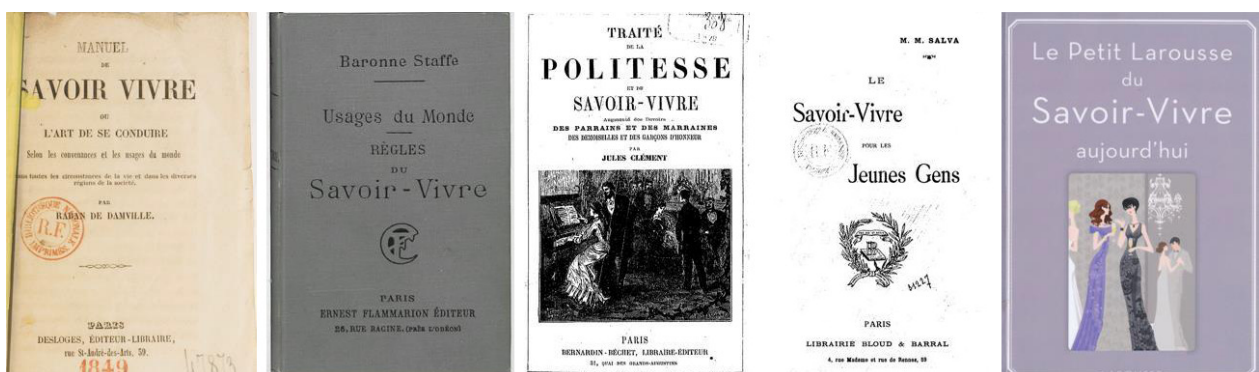
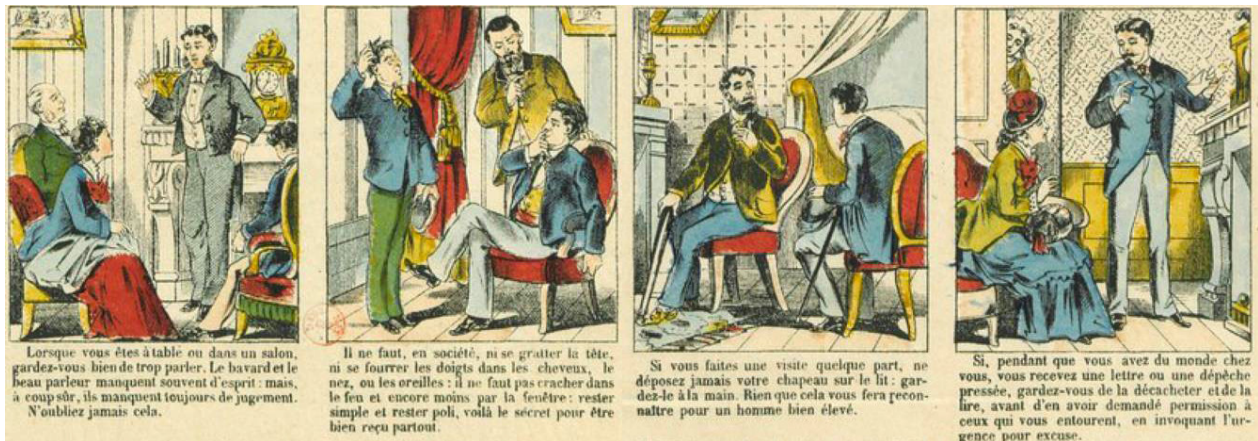


Figure 1. Covers of the *Savoir-Vivre* manuals published respectively in 1849, 1860, 1879, 1898, and 2011.





**Figure 2.** Illustrations on how to properly behave during a visit as illustrated in the 1883 French Encyclopaedia. Source: “*Simple notions de civilité: Puérile et honnête*” (1883).

Adherence to its rules was a guarantor of social distinction and a manifestation of so-called *convenance* (decorum, propriety). Its adoption, alongside *savoir-vivre*, defined the complex landscape of social norms that regulated everyday life and, specifically, the protocols that one had to adopt inside French homes. In the case of the visit social protocols spatially unfolded in the representational spaces of the house. It also regulated more intimate family relationships such as, for instance, conjugal relationships or the education of children. In short, *savoir-vivre*, etiquette, *convenance*, and decorum were the means through which social norms were defined, legitimised, and reinstated in social life to control interpersonal behaviours. It is worth adding that these behaviours require a proper *mise-en-place*: a subtle system of material culture and décor based on symbols that follow the rules of decorum. This is manifested both tangibly (in interior decorations) and intangibly (through reception practices and manners).

Norms for social interaction based on *savoir-vivre* and ceremonies based on etiquette were gradually absorbed by French society and still play an important role in domestic life. These “daily rituals of reception” have been largely studied in traditional anthropology, with Rosselin (2006, pp. 53–54) explaining that the crossing of a threshold symbolises the beginning of new status, a transition that is ritually marked across cultures and agreed upon by a shared “social and cultural consensus”; she stresses the fact that, in France, the rituals of reception are still particularly important, and goes on to say that “when people are coming for dinner at the home of a couple the man is usually in charge of welcoming guests while the woman is in the kitchen finishing the preparation of the meal.” However, social rules for welcoming guests forbid children to open the door (Rosselin, 2006, p. 53). This unspoken rule has clear gender connotations, and the simple act of opening the door to guests not only influences the position of bodies in the space of the home but also defines patriarchal, gendered roles.

Not surprisingly, Rosselin’s description (2006) is similar to the practice of visiting described in late-nineteenth-century *savoir-vivre* manuals, except for the fact that during the aperitif food is usually served. The traditional visit, instead, rarely involved consuming food, and gender roles were generally inverted: the lady of the house played a central role, as she was the conductor of a domestic play that was performed during a visit. This introduces some of the key gender dynamics that unfold inside French interiors. The change in the role of women in welcoming guests exemplifies the shift in the mechanisms of women’s oppression from the *ancien régime* to modern times. Indeed, the fall of the aristocracy, the gradual

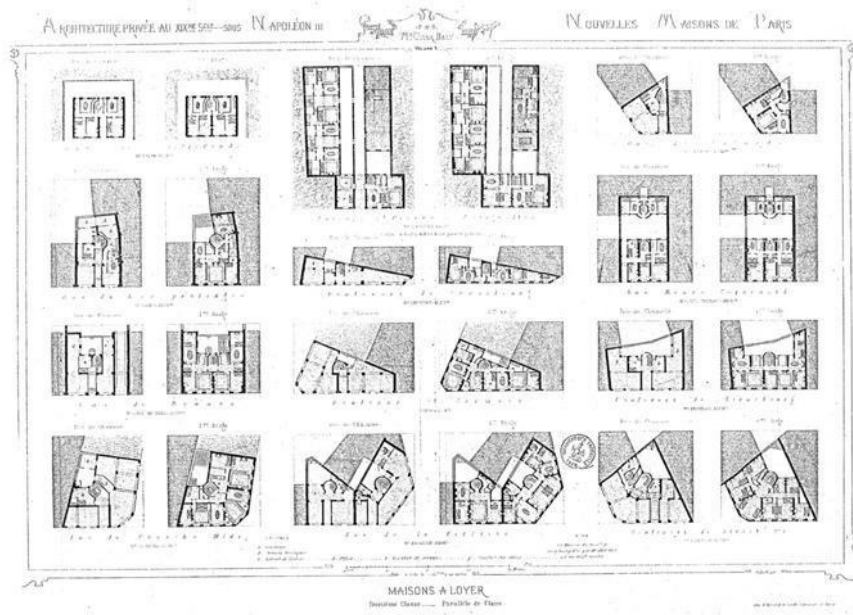
leveling of classes, and the absence of domestic servants changed women's condition and role inside the domestic sphere. If in the past their clothed bodies were seen as an extension of the interior décor that accorded not only with its pleasing aesthetic but also possessed a symbolic dimension, the leveling of social classes and introduction of wives' domestic labour forced them into the kitchen, marginalising their role as hosts. Baker (2013) clarifies Bourdieu's (1998, p. 99) position that considers women "as aesthetic objects" who "naturally take charge of everything concerned with aesthetics" in the "division of domestic labour," anticipating women's centrality in the exercise of their taste in the domestic setting. While aristocratic women were in charge of welcoming guests, because they symbolically embodied the home and family (and thus its social status), middle-class women focused on preparing for the visit but delegated the act of welcoming guests to their husbands (Rosselin, 2006). In short, women's objectification and ceremonial role gradually changed, shifting into labour exploitation: instead of blending in with the wallpaper, the modern woman simply disappeared behind the kitchen door.

## 2.2. Distribution and Tripartition

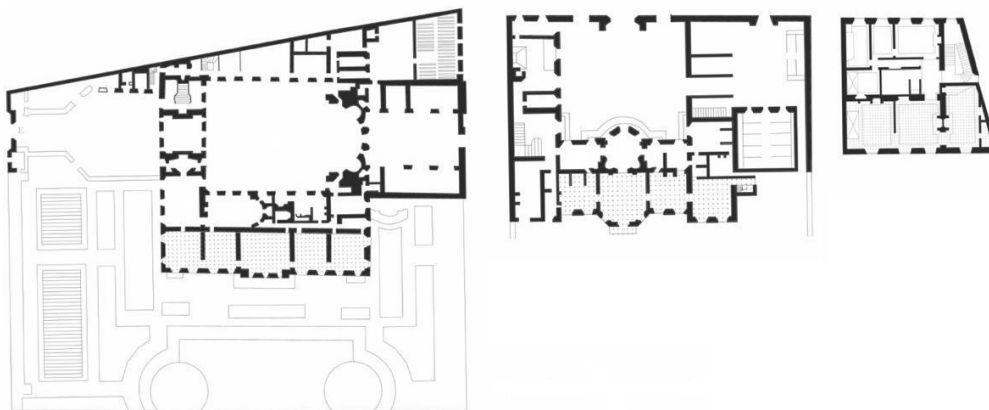
*Savoir-vivre* and distribution treatises emerged in the nineteenth century along with the rise of the bourgeoisie as the leading social class. By the nineteenth century, French architects started to describe the urban bourgeoisie as the norm, establishing a dwelling program and its spatial organisation based on its members' needs. The "art of distribution" reflected this interest and became a subject of major nineteenth-century treatises on domestic architecture. Renowned nineteenth-century architects such as César Daly and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc wrote about distribution, basing their analysis entirely on wealthy bourgeois accommodations. In Daly's most famous treatise, *L'Architecture Privée au Dix-neuvième Siècle sous Napoleon III* (Private Architecture in the Nineteenth Century under Napoleon III) (1864), he clarified the necessity of a tripartition between the private area (which was more intimate and devoted to the family), the public area (devoted to the reception and representation of the inhabitants), and services (Eleb, 1990). This tripartition, considered as the model for any type of dwelling, was subsequently applied to the so-called *maison à loyer* and *maison de rapport* types of middle-class apartment buildings (Figures 3 and 4). Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, architects tried to mediate and adjust the interior distribution principles, adapting them to the dimensions of modest dwellings.

A proliferation of nineteenth-century treatises on the art of distribution or manuals on the art of *savoir-vivre* amongst the bourgeoisie helped establish the heterosexual nuclear family as the social norm and strengthened an ideological system that instrumentalised the French apartment as a model of social conformism. The architectural project of normalising a bourgeois lifestyle was accompanied by an adherence to the rules of decorum, exerting a combined social and spatial control over French citizens. Indeed, the physical effects of codified practices can be analysed in the distribution of reception spaces in residential interiors, ranging from early eighteenth-century aristocratic homes to twentieth-century collective housing (Figure 5). Thence, *savoir-vivre* represented an explicit pedagogical and moral project with great ramifications for the design of domestic architecture.

These processes favoured the construction of French domestic spaces, both socially and architecturally, thereby becoming forms and spaces of representation. Specifically, the house was understood, according to Wigley (1992, p. 350), "as much the product of texts as its condition of possibility. The new forms of writing both depend on and assist in the cultural construction of those spaces. They are literally part of the spaces."



**Figure 3.** *Maison à loyer* drawn by César Daly. Source: Daly (1864).



**Figure 4.** Tripartition of reception spaces (dotted) of a private palace (eighteenth century), a *hôtel particulier*, and a *maison de rapport* (nineteenth century). Drawn by the author based on Eleb (1990).

Wigley (1992) further argues that it is possible to say that treatises and manuals accorded to the cultural construction of the French apartment, enforcing patriarchal systems of oppression through which women’s sexuality was controlled. Hence, both treatises and manuals were instrumental in the cultural construction of the home as a system of representation that produces, shapes, and confines sexuality and gender—they are, therefore, powerful cultural forms of representation. Gender difference “operates as a mechanism in the construction of various cultural representations” that, in turn, guide the architect’s hands (Rendell et al., 2000, p. 105). In short, the social codes and practices that derive from these documents turn the home into a cultural construct that shapes both gender and domestic space.

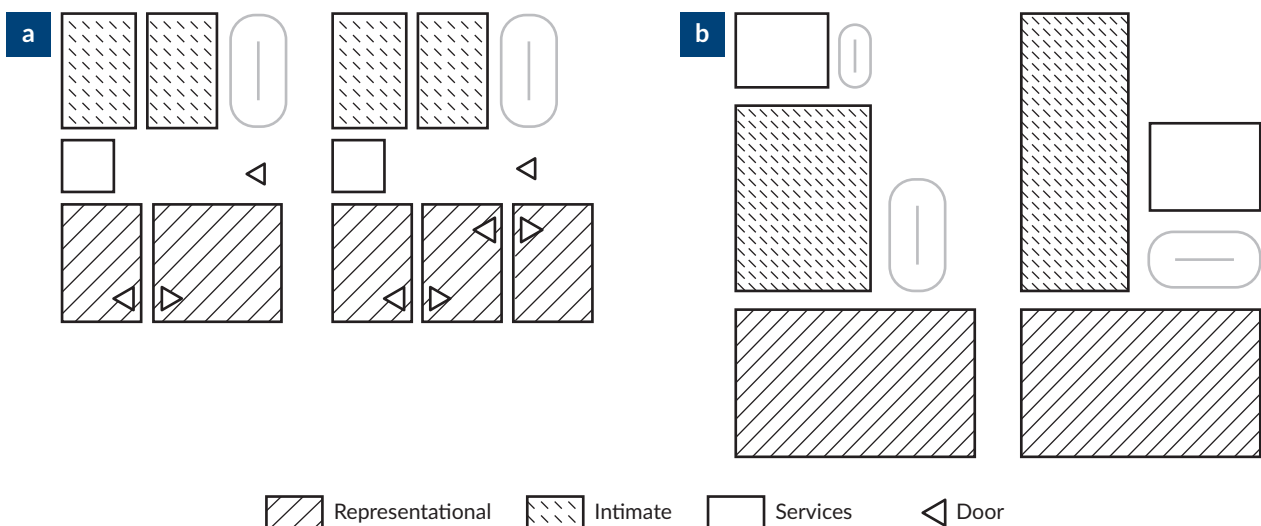
Architects therefore reproduced stereotypical and normalised gender roles through their design. This means that the material and cultural construction (both textual and architectural) of the home has substantial ideological roots and coincides with the construction of the gendered subjectivities that occupy it. Treatises



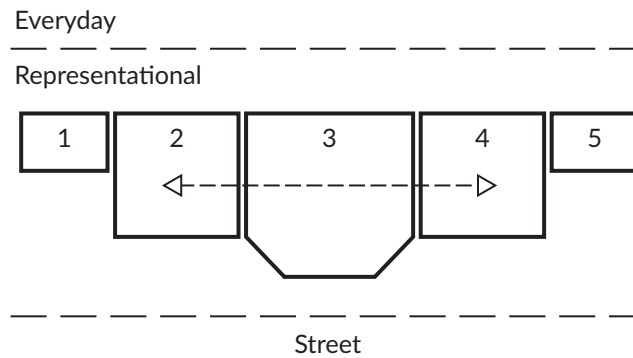
and manuals, but above all, the “art of distribution” intertwined with the new “science of life,” therefore, are not simple guidelines for the design of French residential buildings but tools with both spatial and political implications. Thus, architects have historically reproduced systems of control and specific cultural and spatial forms embedded in France’s patriarchal society. Moreover, social status placed the architect in a position of power, which legitimised their treatises’ pedagogical intent. This might explain the (passive) acceptance and reproduction of the dwelling’s distribution model for centuries.

As anticipated, these considerations should be supported by feminist architectural theory. This new science of interior distribution indeed resulted in an ideological spatial division within domestic walls, proving that architecture can create a clear division of both roles and power within the socially constructed family unit. The bourgeois apartment materialised gendered distinctions, consequently separating public and private spaces inside the home. A clear dividing line defined the layout of the house: the reception area was the realm of the *maître de maison* (master of the house) and generally faced the street side, whereas the private one was dominated by the more functional and intimate rooms that were the undisputed realm of the lady of the house (Figure 4). The third element of the tripartition type, the shared spaces for public reception, was itself tripartite: the centre was occupied by a large living room (sometimes accompanied by a dining room) and the two sides hosted the bedrooms for the husband and wife (Figure 5). Exceptionally in the French case both bedrooms opened to the living room, with all three combined representing the status of a family (Figures 4, 6, 7, and 9).

The tripartition rule continued to play a fundamental role in the distribution of the upper classes’ private residences: the division of the reception areas, the access via an *enfilade*, and the public character of the



**Figure 5.** (a) Diagrammatic distribution of a twentieth-century middle-class apartment with two different layout solutions for the representational spaces. Left: large living room and master bedroom next to it (room on the left), with direct access. Right: double living room (room at the centre and the right) with central opening connecting the two spaces, and adjacent master bedroom (room on the left) with direct access from the central living room. (b) Diagram of the distribution of French bourgeois apartments. Nineteenth-century high bourgeoisie model on the left (with domestic servants’ separate staircase), and twentieth-century bourgeois or high middle-class model on the right. Representational spaces remain tripartite and face the street. An internal courtyard is usually located in the top right corner. Intimate zones and services usually face the courtyard. Drawn by the author based on Eleb (1990).



**Figure 6.** Distribution diagram of representational spaces of an aristocratic or high-bourgeois residence. Number 3 is the central salon, usually connected to other salons or the main bedrooms of the madame and monsieur of the house (2, 4) through an enfilade. Rooms 1 and 5 are annexes to the bedrooms. Drawn by the author based on Eleb (1990).



**Figure 7.** *Intérieur avec femme en rouge de dos*, Félix Vallotton, 1903. Source: Wikimedia Commons (n.d.-a).

bedroom appear to be remnants of the eighteenth-century aristocratic practices of intimately receiving guests in the bedroom. Furthermore, the public character of the room was emphasised by the distribution of pieces of furniture and the proliferation of chairs that indicate the potential number of guests that could spend time in the bedroom with the host (Hellman, 2010, p. 139). Notably, the lady of the house's bedroom granted them a certain freedom, independence, and the chance to strengthen affective ties outside the family nucleus (Figure 8).



Figure 8. *Women in an interior*, Paul Delaroche, 1825–1835. Source: Cleveland Museum of Art (n.d.).

### 3. Furniture, Objects, and the Construction of Self-Identity

#### 3.1. *The Marital Bed*

During the Third Republic, in the second half of the nineteenth century, a new idea of being *chez-soi* (at one's own home) gradually began to emerge among the various layers of the middle class. It was a completely new, low-cut concept detached from the sheer representation of status. As for the middle class, a crystallisation of the dwelling typology occurred (Figure 5) and reflected the project of the normalisation of French society that took place in the twentieth century (Eleb, 1990, 1995). The emergence of this new idea of conjugal affective ties, alongside the necessity of architects to adapt the distribution principles to smaller dwellings (the *maisons à loyer*), led to changes in the use of the representative rooms. This is especially reflected in the development of the marital bed, which as a single piece of furniture summarises major social changes in French society up to the present, when an increased need for privacy challenges the public character of the bedroom.

This passage can be easily summarised in the use of the two terms: *chambre de parade* (parade room), adopted in seventeenth-century French aristocratic mansions, and *chambre principale* (main room), an early nineteenth-century version of the so-called marital bedroom (Eleb, 1990). The genesis of this characterisation of the bedroom dates back to the Middle Ages when rooms did not respond to specific functions and many people shared the same space. The bed itself, with its imposing structure and heavy curtains, guaranteed privacy and heating, making up for the lack of an isolated, private room. Interestingly, the void left between the bed and the wall was called a *ruelle* (small street) in France. These conditions favoured the development of the canopy bed type, considered an integral part of this process of monumentalising furniture. The latter sheltered and protected from indiscreet eyes, assuming an objecthood similar to that of a house. The system of furniture associated with the bedroom was linked to sociability and intimacy, encompassing the double status (public and private) of the bedroom (Hellman, 2010).

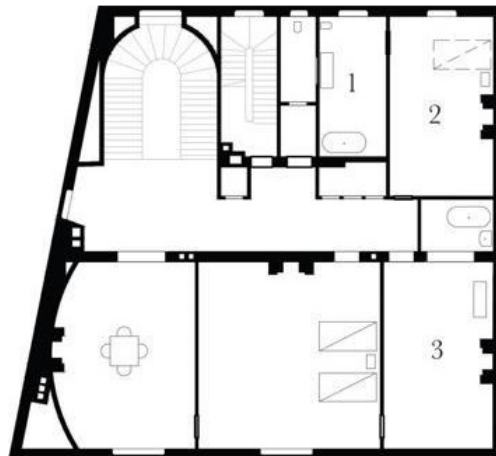




**Figure 9.** *La comtesse Jean de Polignac, née Marie-Blanche di Pietro*, Édouard Vuillard, 1928–1932. Source: Wikimedia Commons (n.d.-b).

Until that moment, the size of the room had been regulated by that of the bed, as major treatise writers considered it the main piece of furniture of a house, so its shape and arrangement determined those of other furniture pieces (Eleb, 1990). The architecture and decoration of the bed gradually evolved from the curtained bed to the marital bed, finally placed in what we commonly call the parents' room, the symbol of the nuclear family. Just as in the canopy bed, the intimacy associated with the family was an integral part of representational devices associated with the social conventions belonging to every age. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the largest and most important room (the one with the double bed) belonged only to the woman of the house, while her husband found sleep in a separate room, often in a single bed. A good example, highlighted by Eleb (1995), is that of the Hôtel de l'Avenue de Ségur in Paris (Figure 10). The lady's bedroom functioned as the conjugal room and is located in the middle of the representational spaces facing the main street, whereas that of her husband is moved to the back, with not even a bed drawn in plan to indicate its use (Eleb, 1995). The husband, indeed, slept either on a single bed or a removable one. So, if he wanted to be intimate with his wife, he was forced to move into the room of his spouse. This is an interesting moment in the development of the French apartment since the wife's bed coincides with the marital bed. This had great consequences for women at large: the gradual consolidation of the marital bedroom as an evolution of the previous tripartite organisation went hand-in-hand with the loss of their fundamental spatial independence (Eleb, 1990, 1995).

This dynamic can be inscribed within the processes of emergence of intimacy and conjugal love, and the consolidation of women's identity within the hetero-patriarchal family structure. Family relationships are instrumental in the definition of narratives of the self. Not by chance did the distribution of the husband and wife's bedroom in France relate to both the definition of their individualities—materialised in the bed—and their position within the family and in the architecture's plan. Figure 5 shows that although it was still



**Figure 10.** Hôtel de l'Avenue de Ségur, Paris (ca. 1880). (1) monsieur's annexes and (3) madame's annexes. In the top right corner (2), the study room can be converted into monsieur's bedroom. At the centre is the marital bedroom, right next to the living room and directly accessible from it. Drawn by the author based on Eleb (1990).

adjacent to the salon, the bedroom stopped being part of an enfilade (Figure 4). The relationship between living areas remained direct, but the conjugal bedroom became accessible from both the corridor and a door located at one end of the salon (Figure 5).

The social control exerted over the lower and middle classes took shape through a mass organisation of the family that was masked as a promise to improve the standards of living through housing (Donzelot, 1979). Social and spatial planning thence adhered to bourgeois morality, with both the family unit and its inhabitation designed to reproduce the established order both materially and symbolically. Due to the emergence of conjugal intimacy, the direct opening of the marital bedroom towards the living room was no longer considered appropriate, with architects trying to provide more privacy whilst remaining faithful to traditional distribution principles. The solution found was quite simple (Figure 5): architects moved the door from the former central position towards the exterior wall.

Despite the formal similarities in the plan organisation of the various dwelling types, the marital bedroom acquired different meanings and roles depending on the social class that was inhabiting the apartment. It was, for instance, open to shared daily activities in the small flats of the working class, gradually acquired the status of private and intimate room for the members of the middle class, and remained an important reception space amongst the members of the bourgeoisie. Its importance and role differed also between members of the same family. As previously mentioned, it played a fundamental role in the lady of the house's life. Her personal space was, indeed, devoted to the unfolding and strengthening of social relationships and the development of her gender and self-identity. In fact, the bedroom was not the only space inside French apartments in which women negotiated their modern identity and role within the patriarchal family; *savoir-vivre* manuals, advice books, and magazines guided women in the process of consolidation of their personal identity, mediated by gestures and tastes but also by practices of homemaking and intimacy (Sparke, 2010). Their activities and choices had repercussions on the architectural space both at an aesthetic and spatial level. By operating within the boundaries of the system aimed at repressing them, women were able to find patterns of resistance through inhabitation, appropriation, and alteration (Forlini, 2024).



The French interior becomes, therefore, the space in which cultural domesticity gradually emerges. Indeed, the occupation of the French apartment's bedrooms today is quite peculiar, but although it is a reversal of the high bourgeois model (Figure 10), with the woman seeking spatial independence in a separate bedroom and the husband relegated to the marital bedroom (now moved to the back of the apartment), it still clearly reflects the dynamics between the intimate, gendered, and individual dimensions of domestic living discussed.

### 3.2. Conservatism, Misappropriation, and Domestic Consumption

The representational rooms of French apartments are spaces of social and cultural conformity but also distinction, rooms in which women and men have been historically performing the choreographed practices of visits according to hierarchical roles and pre-defined codes, but also rooms in which modern and gender subjectivities have been constantly negotiated and consolidated. Feminine taste and style are often expressed inside domestic interiors by women amateur decorators, housewives who started engaging with interior decoration from the eighteenth century onwards (Sparke, 2010). French eighteenth-century aesthetics and interior decoration were embedded in an “overtly feminine world of luxury and elitism” which, according to Sparke (2010), influenced the emergence of a feminine interior aesthetic. Bourdieu's theory identified the mechanisms of taste and class distinction—enforced by the laws of *convenance*—via cultural, symbolic, and economic capital and the reproduction of habitus, exemplified here by both décor and manners. Class distinction and privilege were, thence, expressed through both taste and luxury and enforced through aesthetic criticism: by defining the exclusive boundaries of good taste, the higher strata of social classes reasserted their power.

The taste reform in the twentieth century was not very different in its aims, as the bourgeoisie in power tried to redefine the contours of good taste and high culture by criticising female aesthetics—which relied heavily on the consumption of mass-produced furniture and fittings—and by exerting paternalistic control over the middle and working classes through the design of housing (Donzelot, 1979). The main difference lies in the gendered character of high-cultural manifestations. As Sparke (2010) has extensively demonstrated, if on the one hand eighteenth-century French interior design reflected feminine taste as it exalted the aesthetic over the functional (which influenced ideas of décor until the nineteenth century) and symbolic meaning over honesty, on the other hand, twentieth-century modernist and functionalist high art and architecture qualified as masculine, explicitly rejecting feminine taste and interiors. By outlining the boundaries of twentieth-century good taste, taste reformers marked not only the distance between the bourgeoisie in power and the lower classes but also between male and female tastemakers and creatives.

To Sparke (2010, p. 162), “modern design effectively marginalised feminine culture and left no linguistic or philosophical space for it to compete with what rapidly became the dominant patriarchal culture.” She further argues that in the UK, women negotiated their modern identities by recovering traditional feminine domesticity. They became guardians of the past and were, subsequently, accused by taste reformers and design experts of being anti-progressive. The so-called “culture of conservatism” in women describes widespread practices of design and interior occupation of inter- and post-war housing (Sparke, 2010). Tellingly, the author clarifies that conservative domesticity was promoted through the media and became “embedded as an ideal across class lines in interwar society. And the particular model of domesticity it resembled was that of Victorian society nearly a century earlier” (Sparke, 2010, p. 98). It is considered a form of “resistance to the model of modernity that women were being asked to negotiate” (Sparke, 2010, p. 99).

This Janus-faced conservative modernism, therefore, looked both forward, as it represented women's own negotiate face of modernism, and backward, as it relied on past domestic models: "Inevitably, the bulk of their work resided somewhere in the middle, blending modernist ideals with those of feminine domesticity" (Sparke, 2010, p. 99). Conservative modernism and women's conservatism describe women's domestic culture through a feminist lens and play a fundamental role in the understanding of cultural domesticity.

The dual nature of feminine domesticity, materialised in women's consumption choices in the domestic realm, can be analysed from two key perspectives. On the one hand, it favours the reproduction of patterns of dominance on a spatial, embodied, and objectual level—this point is also supported by sociological and feminist literature that sees consumption as a passive activity of subjugated and dominated women (Partington, 1989). On the other hand, there is a body of social and feminist theory that sees consumption, appropriation, and interior occupation as fundamental to the expression and consolidation of feminine values and domestic cultures. To Douglas (1982), shopping was a liberation, an integral moment in the formation of women's identity. Attfield (1989) reinforces this point as she looks at mass consumption and how domestic consumption could potentially have a positive impact on women's lives via interior appropriation through decoration. Partington (1989, pp. 209–210) goes even further by explaining that the purchase, use, and display of "commodities and cultural objects" are instrumental for the assertion and celebration of femininity, with the designed objects saying more:

About the designer's self-image than it does about the female consumer's needs...Chairs, for instance, were being designed as if sitting down was the only use they had, whereas the female consumer was using them to represent her relations with friends, with husbands and children, with inlaws and with herself...demonstrating the consumer skills she had acquired in a variety of contexts and situations. She used all design objects to make meanings; the fact that these objects also had ostensibly practical functions was irrelevant.

This is a crucial point, as the different uses and meanings attributed to design objects—just like interiors—are acts of resistance of women towards the paternalistic, patriarchal, and pedagogical nature of architectural design, including modernist and mass-produced housing. Indeed, "exactly how, and under what circumstances, women consume goods and services are crucial to the ways in which meanings are articulated in feminine culture" (Partington, 1989, p. 206). This subtle act of resistance is generative of female domestic culture and aesthetics, and key for the formation of women's identities, which are filtered by processes of meaning-attribution, an extension of individuality to the inanimate words of objects and architecture. Partington (1989, p. 211) indeed states that "women's misappropriation of commodities as evidence of resistance" is often unconscious, pertaining to the reworking of shared cultural norms, yet it is the first step towards the acknowledgment of feminine cultural domesticity. The chair is also a particularly relevant case, as Partington's description recalls the role that chairs have usually played inside French interiors across centuries, especially when they embody female sociability inside the home.

The tension between the prescriptive codes of the patriarchy, design, good taste, and behaviours are, therefore, countered by an individual reaction of women consumers and decorators which may or may not have reproduced shared cultural practices, and norms, or they may or may not have appropriated new forms and symbols. Regardless of the patriarchal ideology associated with the object or practice acquired, the use, meaning, and values attributed to them by female consumers, inhabitants (and decorators) generate

resistance and inform feminine culture. “It is precisely through consuming that feminine knowledge was articulated” (Partington, 1989, p. 212), along with feminine meanings and values, which are part and parcel of the feminine enculturation of domesticity. Feminine consumption inserts itself within the larger arena of gender conflict within the domestic sphere, the space where gender politics unfold. Consumption can be, therefore, seen as a different form of appropriation of architectural space aimed at the more positive activity of homemaking, along with the more personal processes of meaning attribution and construction of narratives of the self.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article advances a feminist reading of the spatial and typological evolution of the French dwelling based on habitus, gendered spaces, and practices—including the visit and homemaking. The cultural manifestations of French domesticity discussed are closely interconnected as they concur with the historical, aesthetic, spatial, and performative dimensions of the French home. Feminine domesticity positions itself within these codified dynamics, but it is through the reworking of known, shared culture and codes that women consolidate their identities. These processes have, as shown through historical and contemporary examples, both aesthetic and spatial implications.

They are also small acts of resistance that emerge from lived experience, which are usually overlooked by architects but play a central role in the study of cultural domesticity. It is also worth mentioning that the analytical lens of cultural domesticity advanced in this article can potentially be applied to any cultural context. The study of enculturated practices along with the identification of sexist spatial and symbolic boundaries inside domestic interiors is, indeed, particularly explicit in France. Having uncovered the main characteristics of cultural domesticity, it is easier to identify similar dynamics, even if manifested in subtler ways. It would be, therefore, interesting to extend this study to other Western countries, identify new gendered, alternative domesticities and their socio-spatial implications, and even explore how cultural domesticity could potentially apply to non-Western contexts. The socio-spatial analysis could be enriched by a feminist intersectional approach, or flanked by new critical gender and race theory, extending cultural domesticity to non-binary or diverse ethnic identities. This could be applied to the French context as well, moving this study beyond privileged white women’s experience and extending it to women of colour, from the working-class, or more in general women from more modest backgrounds.

This research also demonstrates that the debate around heterosexual, middle-class, nuclear families, and women—the subjects of stereotyping and normalisation throughout the twentieth century—has not been exhausted. Individual, gendered identities are negotiated precisely within normalising, stereotyping institutions and systems. They are the foundations of a daily struggle that ultimately produces meaning, change, value, and culture. Throughout this research it became, therefore, necessary to rethink what constitutes design: reproduction or reappropriation of institutional frameworks or spaces became a valuable aspect of architectural design seen as a continuous, daily process that is not the exclusive prerogative of the architect. It is also tightly connected to self-formation and the construction of gendered and ethnic identities, which are becoming increasingly valuable components of architectural research. This applies specifically to studies on lived experience, which have been, so far, marginal to architectural theory and practice. This research, therefore, positions itself within the broader context of new architectural histories, specifically the emergence of new feminist architectural histories and theories with a

methodological emphasis on the relationship between identity, culture, lived experience, spatial alterations, and existing architecture.

## Acknowledgments

I thank the Stavros Niarchos Foundation for supporting my research.

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

## References

- Adkins, L., & Skeggs, B. (Eds.). (2005). *Feminism after Bourdieu*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Attfield, J. (1989). FORM/Female FOLLOWS FUNCTION/Male: Feminist critiques of design. In J. A. Walker (Ed.), *Design history and the history of design* (pp. 199–225). Pluto Press.
- Baker, S. E. (2013). *Retro style: Class, gender and design in the home*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bourdieu, P. (1979). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Masculine domination*. Stanford University Press.
- Clément, J. (1879). *Traité de la politesse et du savoir-vivre*. Bernardin Béchet.
- Cleveland Museum of Art. (n.d.). *Women in an interior*. <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/2018.1062>
- Daly, C. (1864). *L'architecture privée aux dix-neuvième siècle sous Napoleon III*. Librairie A. Morel.
- Donzelot, J. (1979). *The policing of families*. Pantheon Books.
- Douglas, M. (1982). *The world of goods*. W. W. Norton & Co.
- Eleb, M. (1990). *Architecture de la vie privée*. AAM.
- Eleb, M. (1995). *L'invention de l'habitation moderne*. Fernand Hazan Editions.
- Forlini, F. R. (2024). The house I'd like to have: Women's spatial cultures, design, and aesthetic in 20th century Italy. *Interiority*, 7(1), 41–60.
- Hellman, M. (2010). The joy of sets. In D. Goodman & K. Norberg (Eds.), *Furnishing the eighteenth-century* (pp. 129–154). Routledge.
- Martin, J. (1993). A philosophy of etiquette. *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 137(3), 350–356.
- Partington, A. (1989). The designer housewife in the 1950s. In J. Attfield & P. Kirkham (Eds.), *A view from the interior: Feminism, women, design* (pp. 206–214). Women's Press.
- Rendell, J., Penner, B., & Borden, I. (Eds.). (2000). *Gender space architecture: An interdisciplinary introduction*. Routledge.
- Rosselin, C. (2006). The ins and outs of the hall: A Parisian example. In I. Cieraad (Ed.), *At home: An anthropology of domestic space* (pp. 53–59). Syracuse University Press.
- Simple notions of civility: Puérile et honnête. (1883). [Engraving]. Série encyclopédique Glucq des leçons de choses illustrées (Groupe IV, Feuille N° 34). Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, France.
- Sparke, P. (2010). *As long as it's pink: The sexual politics of taste*. Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design.
- Wigley, M. (1992). Untitled: The housing of gender. In B. Colomina & J. Bloomer (Eds.), *Sexuality and space* (pp. 327–389). Princeton Architectural Press.
- Wikimedia Commons. (n.d.-a). *Intérieur avec femme en rouge de dos*. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:F%C3%A9lix\\_Vallotton,\\_1903\\_-\\_Int%C3%A9rieur\\_avec\\_femme\\_en\\_rouge\\_de\\_dos.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:F%C3%A9lix_Vallotton,_1903_-_Int%C3%A9rieur_avec_femme_en_rouge_de_dos.jpg)
- Wikimedia Commons. (n.d.-b). *La comtesse Jean de Polignac, née Marie-Blanche di Pietro*. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vuillard\\_-\\_La\\_comtesse\\_Jean\\_de\\_Polignac,\\_n%C3%A9e\\_Marie-Blanche\\_di\\_Pietro,\\_1928-1932.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vuillard_-_La_comtesse_Jean_de_Polignac,_n%C3%A9e_Marie-Blanche_di_Pietro,_1928-1932.jpg)

### About the Author



**Francesca Romana Forlini** (PhD) is an architect, writer, and educator. She is a visiting assistant professor at the New York Institute of Technology where she teaches history and theory of architecture and interior design. She is a Fulbrighter and an alumna of the Royal College of Art, where she completed her PhD in architectural history and theory. She holds an MDes in critical conservation from Harvard Graduate School of Design (degree with distinction).