

# LA CASA

## ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS MODOS DE HABITAR

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## **Habitaciones de servicio y lavaderos: casas modernas en un contexto no moderno**

### *Maid Rooms and Laundry Sinks Matter: Modern Houses in a Non-modern Context*

**Silvana Rubino**

PhD in Social Science, Associate Professor, State University of Campinas, srubino@unicamp.br

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#### **Resumen**

Esta presentación es sobre dos casas modernas en São Paulo y Río de Janeiro. La Casa de Cristal (Casa de Vidro) fue construida en 1951 para ser la residencia de la Lina Bo (1914-1992), la autora del diseño, y Pietro Bardi (1900-1999). La Casa Carmen Portinho (1903-2000) es de 1950, diseño de Affonso Reidy (1909-1964) para vivir allí con su pareja Carmen. Las casas revelan los impasses de la "modernidad" en un país donde el trabajo domestico (malamente) pago prevalecía. La Casa de Cristal tiene una propuesta de espacio abierto que contradice su habitación de empleados. Portinho estableció normas rígidas para la vivienda que ella había construido como jefe del Departamento de Vivienda Popular en Río de Janeiro, pero ninguna de ellas se aplicaba a su propia casa. La idea es utilizar estas dos casas emblemáticas para pensar en la brecha entre el avance de las propuestas y su práctica.

**Palavras clave:** habitación social, Carmen Portinho, feminismo, domesticidad, Lina Bo Bardi

**Bloque tematico:** La casa: mitos, arquetipos, modos de habitar

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#### **Abstract**

*This presentation is about two modern houses in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The House of Glass (Casa de Vidro) was built in 1951 to be the residence of the couple Lina Bo (1914-1992), the author of the design, and Pietro Bardi (1900-1999). The house Carmen Portinho (1903-2000) is a 1950 design of Affonso Reidy (1909-1964) in to live there with his partner Carmen. The houses reveal the impasses of a "modern life" in a country where domestic paid work prevailed. The House of Glass has a proposal of space that contradicts its maid rooms of employees. Portinho established rigid norms for the housing she had built as head of the Department of Popular Housing in Rio de Janeiro, but none of them applied to her own home. The proposal here is to use these houses to reflect on the gap between advanced proposals and their practice.*

**Keywords:** social housing, Carmen Portinho, feminism, domesticity, Lina Bo Bardi

**Topic:** The house: myths, archetypes, forms of inhabitation

The engineer and feminist Carmen Portinho was the first woman to graduate in urbanism in Brazil, in *Universidade do Distrito Federal* in 1939 presenting a dissertation named *The construction of Brazil's new capital in Planalto Central*. It's a research that goes into details about the buildings and the apartments in the city, thinking in food supply and even in the cleaning of the house, including discussions about the housewife. The main point, of course, was a functional project, an equipped kitchen and laundry services made by professionals.

Above the 'pilotis', a floor was reserved exclusively for the mundane chores. Organizing those chores will be the only way to avoid unproductive fatigue and vain waste of time for the housewife. In this floor, will be localized a big power plant of domestic chores. Corporate organization will take the responsibility of those domestic services. The food groups, meat, vegetable, fruit, etc, obtained directly from warehouses, situated in the industrial zone, will be taken to the refrigerators built in the floor destined to mundane chores. Well-installed and equipped kitchens will grant meals at any time. Professionals will also make the cleansing of the apartments, so will the laundry and all other chores needed in a home. A maid to take care of the children and do small services will be enough for each household. The servant problem, so hard to find a solution, can be solved this way.<sup>1</sup>

Where would live this maid? This is not explained in the project's text and there is no illustration. The theme of the maid, however, was part of the debate of the CIAM meeting in 1929, the same that presented to the architects, the Frankfurt Kitchen from Austrian architect Grete Schute-Lihotzy, and it was delivered by Walter Gropius the speech that approach the servant problem:

The finding of the inferiority of individual domestic services gave origin to the design of a business in domestic services that would free each woman from part of her domestic duties. This is thanks to a central organization that works better and more resourcefully than a housewife would even if she put all her efforts in it. The major challenge is to find domestic cleaners that are friendly to those ideas.<sup>2</sup>

The servant problem, was a regular topic in Europe and the United States in the firsts decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. For Carmen Portinho, housing was a «public utility services with the main goal of the complete reeducation of the Brazilian workman that (...) should be included among the required services that the government must provide, such as water, electricity, gas, sanitation, etc.».<sup>3</sup> Being a public service, housing included as domesticity perspective, directed specially for it's main user. «Housing that made women into domestic slaves, always worried with cleaning and maintenance, and where the luxury, in a shocking waste, usually replaced the comfort».<sup>4</sup>

In 1948 Carmen, at the time section head of the DHP, the Department of Popular Housing, position where she gave licenses and inspected popular housing, was designated director. The event was received with rejoice by feminist movements which celebrated with parties.<sup>5</sup> The first

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<sup>1</sup> *Revista Municipal de Engenharia*, May (1939): 292.

<sup>2</sup> In the original: "«La constatation de l'infériorité du travail ménager individuel a fait naître la conception de vastes entreprises ménagères que déchargeant chaque femme d'une partie de ses obligations ménagères. Ceci se fait grace à une organization centrale qui travaille mieux et plus économiquement que ne pourrait le faire une ménagère, meme si elle consacrait tous ses moyens. La difficulté est toujours gradissante de trouver des domestiques favorise celle conception.»" *Die Wohnung für Existenzminimum*, II Internationalen Kongresses für Neues Bauen in Frankfurt am Main 1930, Verlag, Englet & Schlosser, Frankfurt AM Main French copy made by the magazine *Techné*. Arquivo dos CIAMs, ETH Zurich.

<sup>3</sup> Lauro Cavalcanti. *Casas para o povo*. Master degree's dissertation in Anthropology, Rio de Janeiro, Museu Nacional, 1987, in. *O moderno em construção*, edited by Ana Luiza Nobre and Carmen Portinho (Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 1999): 43.

<sup>4</sup> *Revista Municipal de Engenharia*, janeiro (1942), quoted by Ana Luiza Nobre, 44

<sup>5</sup> Flavia Brito do Nascimento, "A casa privada e o conjunto público de Carmen Portinho e Afonso Reidy". In *Domesticidade, gênero e cultura material*, edited by Silvana Rubino et al (São Paulo: EDUSP, 2017), 179.

work of the new department was a big and exemplary housing complex. In 1950 Carmen created the Social Service of the Housing Complex Mendes de Moraes, in which graduated social assistants, family educators and recreation technicians assisted the dwellers, listened to their complaints, identified possible non-compliances to the regulation, looking forward «to guide the critical spirit towards the *good taste* and the excellence in visual arts, in music and in cinema, to promote classes of home economics».<sup>6</sup>

In other words, teaching how to live. The Pedregulho dwellers were low city-employees, such as servants, guards, garages and in rare cases, teachers, that came from precarious housing or poor houses in worker's villages. Although the bibliography marks that they didn't know how to live in community, I want to believe that they didn't know how to live in a community as proposed by the housing complex, and that they clearly had neighboring bonds, in their social relations and their conflicts. Carmen acknowledged the relevance of social assistants. In her text published by *Correio da Manhã* after returning from England, she stated that housing complexes must always include social assistance: «the worker must, before anything, be educated to life in society, which will be relatively easy if they are given the means of education necessary as well as decent life conditions».<sup>7</sup> Thus, was a part of the program to teach how to use the areas of collective use, teach kids not to play in the building halls and teach bathers to shower before betting in the pool.

Although Reidy used to state that the actions of an architect must go from the domestic tool to the urbanism, - which is nothing more than a Bauhaus' dogma – as Carmen had already detailed aspects of everyday life, specially for women, in her project for a capital, it is possible that exists there a conversation between both. If each dweller should buy their own furniture, the kitchen comes with planned furniture and a built-in ironing board. Kitchen, as we know, was always a place where female architects/engineers/designers operate, after centuries being ignored by architecture, seen as a utilitarian space to be used by women and servants.<sup>8</sup>

About Pedregulho there is plenty of bibliography. The question remaining the complex is regarding its authorship: Reidy, Carmen, DHP or all of these together in a work's social division that places that chooses the architect's name to be placed as final and only author? I agree with the opinion of researcher Flávia Brito do Nascimento, in her pioneer work about the DHP:

Publicized to death, the Pedregulho was almost always connected directly with its author, the architect and urbanist Affonso Reidy. The town hall's Popular Housing Department, the organizing body, is lightly mentioned. When there's a compromise, the engineer Carmen Portinho is mentioned, the director of DHP for almost its entire existence, and responsible for most of the execution of the projects. It's not about putting the work and genius off the spotlight, but to include them and discuss it as part of a greater habitation project for Rio de Janeiro, result of a historical process in which many characters had a role to play.<sup>9</sup>

Carmen's feminist path appeared in the project, making that the working woman's “exhausted hand” that would live in the complex didn't find a laundry sink in every unit, but instead a

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<sup>6</sup> Ana Luiza Nobre, 57.

<sup>7</sup> “Habitação popular”. *Correio da Manhã*, March 17 (1946).

<sup>8</sup> “There was probably no arena in which women had as much influence in modern architecture as kitchen.” Mary McLeod. “Domestic reform and European modern architecture: Charlotte Perriand, Grete Lihotzky and Elizabeth Denby.” MoMA, *Modern Women. Women artists at the museum of modern art*. (New York: MoMA, 2010): 180.

<sup>9</sup> Flávia Brito do Nascimento, *Entre a estética e o hábito. O Departamento de Habitação Popular (Rio de Janeiro, 1946-1960)* (Rio de Janeiro: Secretaria Municipal das Culturas, 2008), 104.

collective laundry room. Aside from the feminist perspective, it was taken into account the possibility of clothes hanged in the window, which would tarnish the beauty of the building's front. It wasn't a successful proposal, even with the social assistants giving time to teach how to use the laundry machines, imported from the U.S, people improvised with buckets, bowls, and even cases where the pool water was used to do the family laundry.

There were other complexes created by the Department of Popular Housing, even if not as iconic. But is important the statement of Francisco Bolonha, that among other realizations, such as the project for housing complexes in Paquetá (1952) and Vila Isabel (1948) was a collaborator of Pedregulho.

In Vila Isabel there was a funny event: I projected laundry rooms with a sink and Carmen was mad, because she wanted collective laundry rooms. I insisted 'I needs a laundry room with a laundry sink! People won't wash their floor cloth in the laundry machine!' and her response: 'I will only allow for you to put the laundry sink in the kitchen', I had to agree. So much that, if you visit the complex, will se excellent apartments, but with this issue. No laundry room.<sup>10</sup>

Maybe Carmen couldn't find good examples to follow in the modern architecture literature. Kitchen, yes, there were many, although Frankfurt's kitchen had gained prominence in publications. But laundry room, a place for laundry... by tradition it was a place outside the house, far from it, in the yard or even in the rivers. In other words, from the symbolic point of view, the laundry room is inferior to the kitchen, were food belongs and hierarchically superior to were dirt belongs. Maybe because of that it was important for the project to get away from the laundry room.

Carmen Portinho's house is from 1950, when Pedregulho was becoming complete, and was approved by the Town Hall under the section: "Popular housing", which means, it could not have more than 70m<sup>2</sup> in area. Henrique Mindlin in his *Modern Architecture in Brazil* describes the house as «permanent residence and shelter of a young engineer, actively interested in modern art and currently director of the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro, and that, as sector head of the Department od Popular Housing of Rio de Janeiro's Town Hall, was the main responsible for the construction of Pedregulho». <sup>11</sup> In the same book, Mindlin mentions the area of the cleaning lady.<sup>12</sup> Contrary to the couple Gregori and Mina Warchavchik's house or even the couple Bardi's glass house, her house wasn't a manifest-house, it was just a house, although with very peculiar dwellers. Carmen visited the Warchacvhik's house in 1930 and according to Flávia Nascimento the visit inspired her in ideas about domesticity as reported in a article for *Correio da Manhã*:

It's gonna be hard to forget the odd yet extraordinary feeling I felt visiting that picturesque, super modern corner. I envied for a moment the happiness and well-being of that lucky couple, who by building such a home for themselves, managed to made one of the most beautiful architectonic dreams come true. It made me think in my house in a Spanish colony-style, designed by me when I was leaving school. I reimagined this ideal home that I never build and don't intend to, ever. I rather see it in my dreams, matchlessly beautiful, than destroyed by putting my dream into reality.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Américo Freire and Lucia Lippi Oliveira (org), *Capítulos da Memória do Urbanismo Carioca* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições Folha Seca, 2002), 51.

<sup>11</sup> H. Mindlin, *Arquitetura Moderna no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Aeroplano, IPHAN/MINC, 2000 [1956]): 76.

<sup>12</sup> Mindlin, H., 76.

<sup>13</sup> *Correio da Manhã*, August 24 1930. Quoted by F.B.Nascimento, "A casa privada e o conjunto público de Carmen Portinho e Afonso Reidy", in *Domesticidade, gênero e cultura material*, edited by Silvana Rubino et al. (Paulo: EDUSP, 2017), 174-5.

Her manifesto was Pedregulho, her home was a shelter and residence, far enough from downtown for a divorced engineer living with her partner. It was however a design for a housing complex, even if the size of the land and the social status of the couple weren't compatible with the label. The neighborhood where it was located, in the west-wing of Rio de Janeiro had the requirements for a housing complex, even if the land had 9 thousand m<sup>2</sup> – curiously, the exact same size of the land from the Glass House of the Bardis.<sup>14</sup>

Curiously, the bibliography barely mentions this fact, and when it does, it is with an annoying neutrality, such as Alfredo Britto did in 1999, when mentioning the house:

The essentials: living-meals, room, studio, kitchen, bathroom and laundry room must have at least 70m<sup>2</sup> so it would benefit from the “housing complex” support, with which it is ensured for the owner exemption for the license fee and the funding of four bags of cement each month. For two civil servants it meant a fantastic particularity. A trick made that the terrace, shown in the approved project and for its attributes, not included in the area total, transform into a marvelous room that penetrates from above in the wild, supported by the pilotis and completely surrounded by that area. The house ended up with 95m<sup>2</sup>.<sup>15</sup>

A room that in the first blueprint was just a “bedroom” became the “maid's room”: in the second blueprint there is two beds and an ironing board. Long after the house is finished, an article about female engineers told that in Carmen's house there were no problems, because her husband was an architect, and as such, was interested by his profession. They were a couple with no children and all the domestic chores was done by good domestic servants.<sup>16</sup>

In Pedregulho, as it was already pointed out, the laundry room was in a separate area, away from the housing units, and it was all mechanized, even in early national industry of appliances, because all laundry machines were imported from the United States.

And Carmen's house had not one, but two laundry sinks.

The house in Itaipava was built by Carmen herself, with stones from a river in the surroundings. Around 100 m<sup>2</sup>, it has a living room, a bedroom, kitchen, office and bathroom in the upper deck. In the lower deck, the stairs connecting to the house, a room and a bathroom for the maid and outside these rooms, a giant laundry sink.

The Glass House, planned to home for Lina, overshadows the fact that it was made for a client, a museum director that was the architect's husband. Here the same dynamic seems to be reversed, the house for an architect was made for his wife, a museum director. The houses in Jacarepaguá and Itapava were houses whose terms of agreement between client and architect regarding, dimension, program, workmanship, location, etc... we don't know. Examples that may remind of another couple's house, from earlier, built in the Netherlands. The house Schröder, project from 1923-4 from Gerrit Rietveld (1888-1964) was imagined with such a large participation from the client Truus Schröder-Schröder that the architect signed the project along with her. If the house came to be acknowledged as iconic to Dutch architecture and the modernism in general, is because the social and intellectual goals of Thus were part of the

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<sup>14</sup> For a better notion of the scale of dimensions of the plot, the plot for Pedregulhos is around 5,8 times larger.

<sup>15</sup> Testimony of Alfredo Britto to *Toda minha vida*, op. cit. p. 80. Added emphasis.

<sup>16</sup> Nascimento, “A casa...”, 189.

process: «As client, as much as designer, as much as feminist, Schröder helped to outline the ways of modern architecture».<sup>17</sup>

As a partner, client, engineer, urbanist and feminist, Carmen also did, in a more intense way. It's clear when one turns to the *House of Glass*.

Francesco Tentori, biographer of Pietro Maria Bardi recalls with irony his astonishment when he saw the servants' rooms. He assumed that it was an appropriation, by Lina Bo Bardi, of the memory of colonial Brazil. In the *House of Glass* the service area is strictly separated from the body of the house by a courtyard and a door. Between this and the block where the Bardi couple lived, the kitchen makes the transition, which is not very different from any bourgeois house or apartment built in that decade and even today. The employees had a *minimum housing*, independent of the rest of the house. Also Giò Ponti noticed this situation of the place of work and of the workers of the house, denominating this part of *viscere* (guts), arguing that this house had two sectors: one stripped for the visitors and another opaque, sheltered and secret – *segretto* – for the housemaids.

By designing this independent accommodation, this minimum space for dwelling, Lina translate in a quite bourgeois manner the achievements of the CIAM of 1929, Frankfurt, which was dedicated to discuss the housing of the workers, the so-called minimal habitation. It was at that moment that the Frankfurt Kitchen became known as a practical and taylorist space for the modern woman who worked and took care of the house. This kitchen is designed for social housing, *siedlungen* for the German working class. Two objects of discussion of 1929 re-emerged in the modern house of Lina Bo Bardi: the functional kitchen, although spacious and used by maids, and a small apartment for worker-class, although in the same house. One could say that the service apartment has spatial qualities that place it well above not only the colonial slave quarters but also the employee rooms in other residences. But this scheme somehow mirrors an urban scheme: the bourgeois housing in a privileged neighbourhood and the housing of the worker in a periphery or suburban of the city, two parted spaces.

She wrote: "the house is spacious, especially as far as service facilities are concerned", and in the chapter these apartments belong to the type of "minimal apartments, species of cells - for one or two girls at most". It is the secret that amazed the Italians Tentori and Ponti, and an evidence of the blind faith of modernism about its gains and the gamble in a universal man. Progressive and democratic as a neighborhood in Frankfurt in the Weimar Republic, the minimal apartments were, rather, a hidden room in a modern house in Morumbi in São Paulo of the 50s.

About the kitchen: it may be inspired by the Frankfurt kitchen, designed by the Austrian architect Grette Schütte-Lihotsky, shown in *Die neue Wohnung und ihr Innenausbau* in 1925, and immediately included in various housing projects constructed in the city by Ernst May. The unit in question was a *Kochküche*, a kitchen made for cooking, small with an aura of modernity that came from the use of electricity. The novelty crossed back over the Atlantic and in 1934 the book *Modern Housing*, written by Catherine Bauer and published in New York, lauded Schütte-Lihotsky's kitchen as one of the foremost achievements of the new architecture.

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<sup>17</sup> Alice Friedman and Maristella Casciatio, "Family matters: The Schröder House, by Gerrit Rietvelt and Truus Schröder". In *Women and the making of the Modern House. A social and architectural history*, Alice Fiedman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006).



If we consider its dimensions, the kitchen of th Bardi's house could be compared to the functional American kitchen, a more spacious and more equipped version of the Frankfurt kitchen - after all it was a bourgeois house, while the latter was intended for housing complexes - but Lina Bo Bardi did not represent the suburban housewife of the *Kitchen Debate* that entertained North America during the cold war. The kitchen was both German and American, far from the traditions of domestic space in Brazil.

However, In an article published in 1958, Lina showed a photo of her own hands cleaning the dishes, with a legend: "The dishwasher eliminates everything humiliating in this type of work: the fat and waste are not touched by the hands, as a special rubber spatula helps to remove the latter to the crusher, which eliminates them". This passage refers us to all notions of impurity, danger, filth, pollution, and taboos related to them, as treated by Mary Douglas in his classic *Purity and Danger*. The kitchen is the place of the debris of the house, but the dirt is also in the eyes of the beholder: "When we honestly reflect on our brushings and cleanings," wrote the British anthropologist Mary Douglas, "we realize that we are not mainly seeking to avoid diseases and rather (we are) separating, demarcating boundaries, making visible statements about the home that we intend to create from the material home.

As in the 1950s the middle class of São Paulo continued to rely on the domestic worker and Lina proposed an equipped kitchen full of domestic appliances. The result, however, of this new technology, from the point of view of the delicate relationship between the owner of the house and her housekeeper, was the lack of prestige of the latter's traditional knowledge, which resisted innovation. At that moment in Brazil the household appliances began to appear while the servants remained in the houses: the enlightened bourgeoisie thus enjoyed the better of two worlds.

This became quite clear when, visiting the *House of Glass* in 2010, I asked to examine the household appliances. They were intact, untouched. When I commented so with the housekeepers, the response came quickly: "The employees did not know how to use them." If such an observation does not minimize the proposal of a modern kitchen in a modern house, it is certainly revealing of the gender, generation and class constraints that, perhaps despite some efforts and intentions, end up being revealed in domestic architecture in Brazil.

But is time to return to the houses of the Carmen-Reidy couple, and their laundry sinks, to question the sociological impossibility of believing in the universal man, in projects that aimed to serve a faceless client, in chairs that anyone would sit. Carmen and Reidy highlight that subjects socially situated made their project for an "other" without concern in listening or inquire the client. In making their own homes, a choice system was conducted using identity components, and the modern architecture seen as a reason was certainly part of this identity. Therefore the houses of Jacarepaguá and Itaipava, beautiful, cost-effective and modern, pointed the limitations of projects for a collective client, that is so abstract and idealized that even with the best intentions, didn't take the client into account.

Apparently, the solution for the "servant problem", announced in her plan for a capital and put in practice in Pedregulho, did not apply to any social group. But the servant problem was basic for us to understand the expansion of a Brazilian modern architecture, not with manifest-houses, but with their acceptable versions. This distance between what's designed for a collective and what's put in practice wasn't a debate only in Brazil, after aal even in designing the well-known Frankfurt Kitchen, the Austrian architect Margarete Schütte Libotzky also had never used a

single kitchen. «The truth of the matter was, I'd never run a household before designing the Frankfurt Kitchen, I'd never cooked and had no idea about cooking».<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, quoted in Julia Kinchin and Aidan O'Connor, *Counterspace. Design and the modern kitchen* (New York: MoMA, 2011), 20.