

Articles

Spatial Segregation of Reproductive Labour in Residential Buildings

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Preceding Assumption

In this essay I will research the parallels in the placement of reproductive labour from the 17th and today. In doing so, I will check my assumption that in terms of visibility and acknowledgement, as well as respect and noticeability, there are many parallels up to these days.

How did the spatial as well as the social placement of reproductive labour in residential buildings and in urban landscapes change in Western Europe in the upper classes?

In the process, observations of the spatial setting in Huis Dedel, The Hague, will be combined with research of servant's rights and duties in history. Personal observations of the societal placement of reproductive labour in present days will be supported by the results of further research.

There are two major factors that are difficult to leave out: on the one hand the employment status and freedom of servants in the 18th century given Europe's history in slave trade.¹ On the other the ongoing fight for equal rights for women across Europe, with its beginning in the French Revolution in the 18th century, and the situation of women still being tasked with domestic labour more often.^{2,3}



women protesting for payed reproductive labour in the 1970s [Image 1]

¹ Cook, Greg: Were Those Black 'Servants' In Dutch Old Master Paintings Actually Slaves? wbur, Jan 15th 2016. on: <https://www.wbur.org/artery/2016/01/15/black-servants-old-master-art-slavery>, accessed Jan 4th 2021

² Remy-Hébert, Brigitte: The first women's movement. FU Berlin, 2011. on: https://www.jfki.fu-berlin.de/academics/SummerSchool/Dateien2011/Papers/juncker_remy.pdf, accessed Jan 18th 2021

³ Nier, Hedda: So ungleich ist Hausarbeit verteilt. Statista, Mar 8th 2019. on: <https://de.statista.com/infografik/15857/verteilung-von-hausarbeit-bei-maennern-und-frauen/>, accessed Jan 8th 2021

In dealing with the spatial segregation primarily, both topics can't be covered to the extend I feel they'd deserve in the discussion about reproductive labour.

Definition of reproductive labour as opposed to productive labour

The Oxford Dictionary defines work as an “activity involving mental or physical effort done in order to achieve a purpose or result”.⁴ It adds right after further information: “Mental or physical activity as a means of earning income; employment.”⁵ It is very common to call only those activities work or labour that are monetarily remunerated. The reference made by this statement is mainly pointing out productive labour, labour seen as serving the production of goods. On the economical side this part of labour is more important in most countries and employs the bigger part of society. The Federal Agency for Civic Education in Germany describes it as “instrumentally¹ bound, purposeful, socially useful planned activity for which mental and physical forces are used in production and service”.⁶

Opposed to the productive side, the reproductive labour is set. It summarizes activities which are working on creation and preservation of society. It describes domestic work, raising children, caring for the elderly, sick, or physically challenged. Voluntary activities and thereby unpaid work in the social and cultural sector fall within this terminology as well.⁷

Due to the traditional “gender-hierarchical division of labour within capitalist-patriarchal society”,⁸ it is predominantly women who do domestic labour.⁹ These activities are mostly performed privately, in isolation and unpaid. In western Europe many women entered the labour market in the past fifty years. The result is that reproductive activities are continuously marketed.¹⁰ Child care, care for the elderly, house cleaning or delivery services are more often paid for, even though they form jobs in the lower income sector.

⁴ Lexico: work. on: <https://www.lexico.com/definition/work>, accessed Jan 7th 2021

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Notz, Gisela: Unbezahlte Arbeit. bpb, Oct 19th 2010. on: <https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/gender/frauen-in-deutschland/49411/unbezahlte-arbeit>, accessed Jan 7th 2021. Trans. Malte Sonnenschein

⁷ Exploring-Economics-Team: Reproductive Labour and Care. Exploring Economics, 2016. on: <https://www.exploring-economics.org/en/discover/reproductive-labour-and-care/>, accessed Jan 7th 2021

⁸ Notz, Gisela: Unbezahlte Arbeit. bpb, Oct 19th 2010. on: <https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/gender/frauen-in-deutschland/49411/unbezahlte-arbeit>, accessed Jan 7th 2021. Trans. Malte Sonnenschein

⁹ *ibid.*

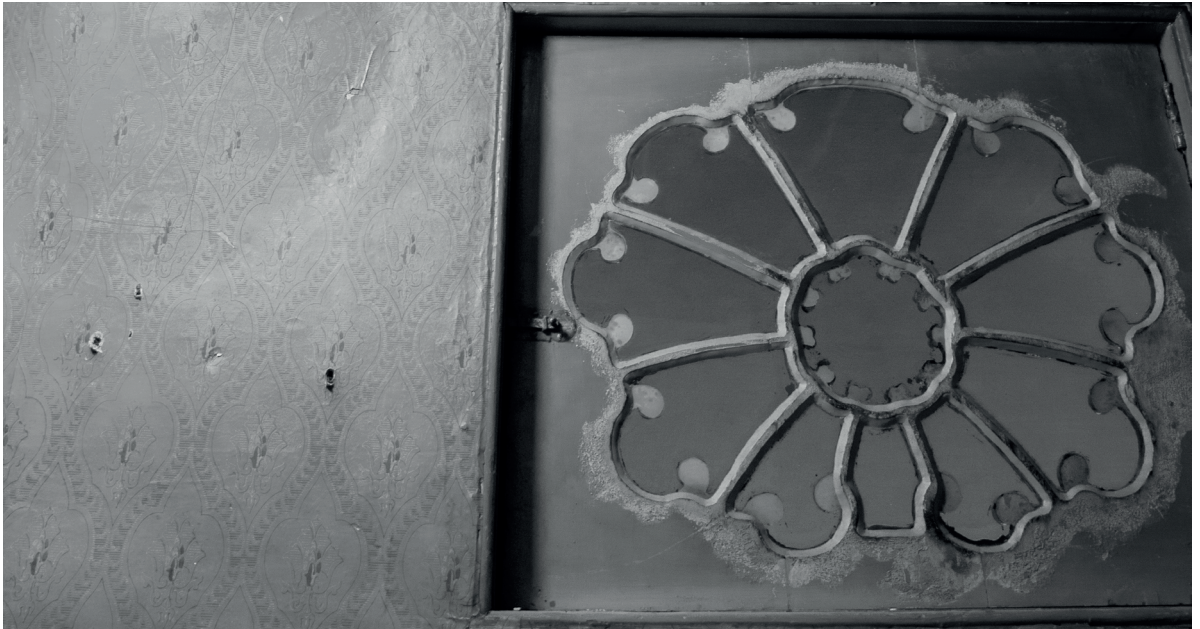
¹⁰ Exploring-Economics-Team: Reproductive Labour and Care. Exploring Economics, 2016. on: <https://www.exploring-economics.org/en/discover/reproductive-labour-and-care/>, accessed Jan 7th 2021

Spatial Segregation in the Past using the Example of Huis Dedel

Huis Dedel, built in the 17th century in the city centre of The Hague, was inhabited for several generations not only by the Dedel family, but also by their staff consisting out of up to seven servants.¹¹ The current user, the Design Museum Dedel, claims it is a “city palace” rather than just a residential building.¹²

In the 17th and 18th century the employment of servants was common for the upper classes in Western Europe and considered a status symbol.¹³ But in the complex hierarchy of society, direct contact between the servants and the masters and mistresses was to be as limited as possible, with some lower servants not even allowed to look at, let alone speak with their employers.¹⁴ In general, the working conditions of servants were harsh, consisting of up to seventeen hour days with little pay and almost no vacation.¹⁵ They were housed in the damp and dark places of the house, the attic and the basement, where they also spend most of their time.

By keeping the staff out of sight of their employers, a general spatial segregation of their existence and their work in the house was implemented. And “the contrast between the sumptuous, richly decorated master’s areas and the



inside of a hidden servants' room, seeing only the backside of the stucco decorating the masters areas [Image 2]

¹¹ DMD: About Huis Dedel. n.d. on: <https://designmuseumdedel.nl/en/huis-dedel/about-huis-dedel/>, accessed Jan 7th 2021

¹² DMD: House Rules. n.d. on: <https://designmuseumdedel.nl/en/house-rules/>, accessed Jan 8th 2021

¹³ Cox, Pamela: Servants — The True Story of Life Below Stairs — Knowing Your Place. BBC Two, Sep 28th 2012. on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqiIMASK5MIU&t=66s>, accessed Jan 6th 2021

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Hill, Bridget: Servants. Encyclopedia of European Social History, 2020. on: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/international/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/servants>, accessed Jan 6th 2021

dull-coloured servant's quarters is stark", Pamela Cox summarizes for BBC2.¹⁶ The attic of Huis Dedel, not only housing servants in three unheated rooms, was the major place for washing and drying the laundry. The uninsulated roof and the Dutch climate provide a cold and damp atmosphere, the only warmth coming up from the fireplaces in the bedrooms right below. The basement, housing further servants, was also unheated, apart from the big kitchen stove delivering some warmth. The damp and cold climate in those areas often caused health issues for the servants.¹⁷

Both floors were probably rarely visited by the house's owners, their only reason would have been to check on their servants or to access the safe at the bottom of the basement stairs.

But spatial segregation didn't only happen by placing the servant's activities in different floors with their own, low entry from the street: special doorways and secret rooms are provided in the 1st and 2nd floor as well, to make sure servants wouldn't cross ways with the masters and mistresses and could hide quickly. A phenomenon common across European residential buildings of the aristocracy in that time. Anonymity and invisibility were a big part not only of servants lives, but also of their activities.¹⁸



Servants working in the basement kitchen in 17th century [Image 3]

Servants tasks in the bel-etage or the 2nd floor, where the master bedrooms were located, were to be completed when those were empty. Taking care of dusting and cleaning, lighting the four fireplaces and maintaining the fires just as the

¹⁶ Cox, Pamela: Servants — The True Story of Life Below Stairs — Knowing Your Place. BBC Two, Sep 28th 2012. on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqiMASK5MIU&t=66s>, accessed Jan 6th 2021

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

lights (consisting of candles first and gas lamps later) were one part. But also changing the linen, polishing the tenant's shoes and watering the plants were activities best done unseen. There we have an explanation for the long workdays, as those activities not only had to be done completely by hand in those days, but also partly before the masters and mistresses would start their day or after they went to bed.

Comparing the Scenario of the Past with Present Times

This treatment of reproductive labour partly still is alive. Today, we can look back on a significant development of household appliances and machines as well as societal changes. These have led to household live-in servants becoming a rarity among the upper middle class – yet domestic work still remains something to hide from the public or guests.

In modern architecture, the invisibility and isolation of reproductive labour still can be seen. The laundry machine will be in the basement, or at least out of the



delivery service employees waiting outside a fast food chain to pick up their packages [Image 4]

living areas if possible, the cleaning is to be done, when nobody is home. "For example, the functional kitchen of the post-war period in most flats was designed so small that only one person could be in it.", Katrin Dietrich states in her analysis of patriarchy in architecture.¹⁹ A kitchen for one person only simultaneously means no division of labour or visibility for anybody else than the working person – mostly women. The percentage of women entering the job market has significantly changed since designs as the Frankfurt kitchen, made to be perfectly

operated by one person only, were developed in 1926.²⁰

Still, most families even today live in a traditional distribution of roles with the women taking care of most reproductive activities and men leaving for work.²¹ While those leaving for productive work visibly move to another place, meet colleagues there, have architecture built for said purpose, the workplace for reproductive care is mostly the private house, working in solitude and invisible in the city. And it is for the most part unpaid.

The built environment is a product of society which reflects social norms and values, it effects how society acts in it — Dietrich concludes: “Architecture can point people to their place.”²² This place being, for those taking care of reproductive labour, hidden in their private homes.

Of course we, the inhabitants of industrialised countries, experienced a very fast development in the earlier past, which outsources some services, e.g. cooking, partly to delivery services. This industry doubled in size over the course of only the past five years.²³ But still, in the observation of these service providers, the similarity to servants in their Victorian uniforms are obvious: the individual vanishes behind a uniform, only created to reduce the human being wearing it to their job.²⁴ These workers are there to disappear from their clients sight as quickly as possible after delivering — not to say serving them — may it be parcels, groceries or food. If you visit a restaurant employing such services, you will mostly find them waiting outside, while the customer is allowed in, where there is warmth and shelter, as well as seating. The zones of comfort are still there for the people in power, while the employees are meant to move quick, unobtrusive and effective. Their protest is still the same: against bad working conditions and long hours with little pay.²⁵

Conclusion

The nature of reproductive labour has changed significantly: It has become less physically exhausting due to technical progress and there seemingly is more freedom of choice for the people doing the work, though their spatial placement is still not very visible. The appreciation and acknowledgement of this work grows slowly, but the similarities to a society from three centuries ago are unmistakable.

¹⁹ Dietrich, Katrin: Reclaim the City — Männerzentrierte Städte und feministische Architektur. Archiv3, 2012. on: https://www.archiv3.org/volltext_277352.htm, accessed Jan 7th 2021

²⁰ Kühn, Gerd: Wohnkultur und kommunale Wohnungspolitik in Frankfurt am Main 1880-1930. Bonn, 1998. p.147f. Trans. Malte Sonnenschein

²¹ Notz, Gisela: Unbezahlte Arbeit. bpb, Oct 19th 2010. on: <https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/gender/frauen-in-deutschland/49411/unbezahlte-arbeit>, accessed Jan 7th 2021

²² Dietrich, Katrin: Reclaim the City — Männerzentrierte Städte und feministische Architektur. Archiv3, 2012. on: https://www.archiv3.org/volltext_277352.htm, accessed Jan 7th 2021. Trans. Malte Sonnenschein

²³ Singh, Sarwant: The Soon To Be \$200B Online Food Delivery Is Rapidly Changing The Global Food Industry. Forbes, Sep 9th 2019. on: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sarwantsingh/2019/09/09/the-soon-to-be-200b-online-food-delivery-is-rapidly-changing-the-global-food-industry/>, accessed Jan 8th 2021

²⁴ Cox, Pamela: Servants — The True Story of Life Below Stairs — Knowing Your Place. BBC Two, Sep 28th 2012. on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqimASK5MIU&t=66s>, accessed Jan 6th 2021

²⁵ Haswell, Julius: Foodora and Deliveroo couriers protest working conditions in Berlin. The Local, May 18th 2017. on: <https://www.thelocal.de/20170518/foodora-and-deliveroo-couriers-protest-working-conditions-in-berlin>, accessed Jan 8th 2021

Although modern servants don't live in unheated rooms without windows anymore and also their workload might be regulated more thoroughly by the law, their situation isn't great. Nine out of ten cleaners are employed illegally in Germany today, leading to insurance problems, insecurity, misuse of power and inhumane working conditions.²⁶ Similar problems occur down the chain in many service industries, such as delivery workers, couriers and further more.²⁷ Spatially, those workers are still separated, the cleaners come in, when nobody is home or out of working hours in offices.

Domestic work is unpaid and doesn't get acknowledged visibly, even less spatially in society. It remains hidden from the areas of representation and comfort. The treatment of the people serving us food and bringing us supplies is still similar to the little interaction of the past. They are supposed to do their job silent, quick and must not appear too relatable to their employers or even pitiful. The similarities to the situation of the servants in the 17th century are obvious. What used to be the bell to ring servants is now an app. The beds are still made, and clothes washed daily for a bigger part of society, mostly men, without them contributing to it.

²⁶ Davis, Austin; Walther, Tessa: Housekeeping in Germany: You clean up my mess and I pay you for it! DW, Aug 10th 2019. on: <https://www.dw.com/en/illegal-cleaners-germany-struggle-work/a-49908013>, accessed Jan 18th 2021

²⁷ DPA: Lieferdienst-Fahrer demonstrieren für bessere Bezahlung. SpiegelOnline, Aug 22nd 2020. on: <https://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/unternehmen/lieferando-foodora-lieferdienst-fahrer-demonstrieren-fuer-bessere-bezahlung-a-1283124.html>, accessed Jan 18th 2021

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Images

Image 1
<https://www.peoplespolicyproject.org/2020/10/19/the-earned-income-tax-credit-is-racist/>,
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