



LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS
MODOS DE HABITAR

ABADA EDITORES

LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS MODOS DE HABITAR

II CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL CULTURA Y CIUDAD
GRANADA, 23-25 ENERO 2019



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La Casa. Espacios domésticos, modos de habitar
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Habitar un espacio, contemplar un paisaje: mujer, jardín y arquitectura doméstica en China (desde el siglo X hasta el XVIII)	1972
Antonio Mezcu López	
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La casa a medida: de la casa ideal a la casa real entre los siglos XIX y XXI

The Made-to-Measure House: From an Ideal Home to a Palace Between the 19th and 21st Centuries

Maria Teresa Feraboli

PhD Architect, Researcher, Politecnico di Milano, mariateresa.feraboli@polimi.it

Resumen

La casa a medida representa la vivienda ideal que para muchos hoy en día presiona sobre el concepto de "tipo": los esquemas de venta de nuevas viviendas, los programas de televisión sobre el hogar, e incluso un símbolo de la estandarización industrial como IKEA, subrayan la importancia de personalizar los interiores de las viviendas. Podría decirse que éste es el punto de llegada de una inversión de la tendencia que siguió a los años del Movimiento Moderno, cuando el "tipo" y su repetibilidad se convirtieron en el ideal que inspiró tanto la ética como la estética de la arquitectura y el diseño de interiores. Después de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, una revisión crítica del racionalismo ya había enfatizado nuevos valores (la presencia de lo antiguo, del arte, de lo sentimental junto a lo moderno) e introducido acciones correctivas como la flexibilidad del mobiliario modular; sin embargo, la postmodernidad y la revolución digital -que ha cancelado los límites geográficos y temporales tradicionales- parecen haber fragmentado la idea de "tipo" en una miríada de soluciones *ad personam*.

Palabras clave: casa, antropología, mitos, espacio, interiores

Bloque temático: La casa: mitos, arquetipos, modos de habitar

Abstract

The made-to-measure house represents the ideal dwelling which for many people today puts pressure on the concept of "type": the schemes to sell new dwellings, TV programmes on the home, even such a symbol of industrial standardization as IKEA, all underline the importance of customizing residential interiors. Arguably, this is the arrival point of a reversal in the trend following the years of the Modern Movement when the "type" and its repeatability became the ideal that informed both the ethics and aesthetics of architecture and interior design. Post WWII, a critical revision of rationalism had already emphasized new values (the presence of the ancient, of art, of sentimental items next to the modern) and introduced corrective actions such as the flexibility of modular furniture, however, post-modernity and the digital revolution – which has cancelled traditional geographical and temporal limits – seem to have fragmented the idea of "type" into a myriad solutions ad personam.

Keywords: house, anthropology, myths, space, interiors

Topic: The house: myths, archetypes, forms of dwelling

Introduction

This study examines the crisis in the concept of the accommodation-type which has distinguished the design approach of much of the 20th century through the propensity for a “made-to-measure house”, seemingly a widespread objective of home-making as represented by contemporary TV channels dedicated to the theme. A possible outcome of the need to redefine the psychological *and* geographical identity of dwelling, increasingly shaky because of profound social changes and different habits caused by the digital revolution, the “customized house” is however also a latent aspiration of modernity which, between the 19th and 21st centuries, blossomed and withered until vanishing in the heroic years of the Modern Movement, only to reappear now in the forms of today’s post-industrial eclecticism. The outcome of around three years’ work at the Department of Design of the Polytechnic University of Milan, the research focused on domestic design seen as a fundamental line of inquiry for a potential history of interiors, taking a close look at individual historical moments, ideals, projects and real cases considered particularly noteworthy for the formation of a common aesthetic imagery and shared habits. The study also took advantage of numerous bibliographic and documentary sources from every era (literature, manuals, periodicals, archives), and of means of communication including commercial catalogues and TV and digital media, whose capacity to influence the taste of contemporary society has become increasingly pervasive.

1. Between dream and reality: from literature to the interiors handbook

The ideal residence, according to Charles Baudelaire the interpreter *par excellence* of the modern city, is the portrait of whoever lives there in terms of educative, social and economic opportunities, so much so that this writer and critic stresses that almost all of us enjoy imagining the house that best suits us, building it in our imagination. As a result, this a house born from the individual personality and to satisfy the latter it must be specially conceived, designed and built: it is the tabernacle “tailored” for the aesthete, where art and life nourish one another in a symbiotic process that emerges from literature (Baudelaire himself, Poe, Wilde, Huysmans, D’Annunzio, Praz).



Figure 1: Mario Praz, the lounge in the house in Via Giulia, Rome, 1964
Source: Mario Praz, *La casa della vita* (Milan: Mondadori, 1964)

And the interiors handbooks contribute to the dissemination of this objective and translate it into a common vulgate. Precisely because it is “a made-to-measure dream” the house seems changeable, as Baudelaire narrated in his *Projects*, and is transformed by the evolution in the life of the individual or even with his or her moods.¹ It can be small (the room that Poe imagined for himself), large and isolated (the palace of Jean des Essaintes, the main character in Huysmans’ *À Rebours*), a sharer in urban vitality (the Zuccari Palace of Andrea Sperelli in D’Annunzio’s *Il Piacere*), representative of the family of an Aesthete (the real home of Wilde in London’s Tite Street) or of a couple (Praz’s house in Via Giulia, later adapted to the birth of his daughter), and so on, however, it is always a cultured home, decorated with works of art, precious objects, and books.

It is the house which the architect Alfredo Melani describes in the short chapter *Sulla decorazione e l’addobbo di un’abitazione privata* of his handbook *Decorazione e industrie artistiche* (1888-89), adapting it to the bourgeoisie of his day, and becomes the absolute protagonist of his subsequent *L’arte in famiglia. Lettere a una signorina* (1890).² In fact, Melani reads the mirror of an individual in the home, as were the literary residences for the lives of the characters imagined by writers: however the domestic stage described by Melani tends to transform the exceptionality of the novels into an easy-going everyday life whose characters turn into canny advice adapted to reach a wider audience. As the British handbooks teach, Melani mainly suggests women to win his case since they have traditionally been entrusted with organizing the house and its interior: he sets out to encourage their interest by stressing that the house must remain an expression of individual character and taste but supported by a suitable education in beauty which comes from reflection on principles borrowed from architecture and not from whimsical occurrences. Not only that: the house must respond to the needs of the present which cannot be represented by historical styles, an expression of ideals and practices already surpassed, but by *Arte Nova*, a mirror of the rhythms of modern life.



Figure 2: The ideal house according to Lidia Morelli
Source: Lidia Morelli, *La casa che vorrei avere* (Milan: Hoepli, 1931)

¹ Charles Baudelaire, “I progetti”, in *Opere. Lo spleen di Parigi*, ed. by Clemente Fusero (Mondadori: Milan, 1965), 559-561.

² Alfredo Melani, *Decorazione e industrie artistiche. II. Evo Moderno* (Hoepli: Milan, 1888-89), 217-228.

And his teaching must have been effective, if Lidia Morelli, the sister of the painter from Turin Ennio Morelli, and the author in 1931 of the handbook *La casa che vorrei avere* [*The House I Would Like to Have*], identified the ideal home in an existing small villa, soberly eclectic, whose ground plan, doors and windows are attributable to a slow process of renewal which slowly wormed its way towards the modern. The work of the architect Frapolli, situated on the edge of Turin's urban growth and isolated inside a garden, the villa has an entrance hall that seems a copy of the welcoming and rigorous vestibule, with its dark wood panelling described by Melani but, according to the writer, the large doors and windows indicate the culture of the Italian-style house, open towards the outside. The internal layout, where the lounge and dining room are still separate, shows an initial rationalizing of the kitchen and bathroom, and a reduction in size of the passageways. On closer observation, however, the house reveals "the very life of its inhabitants" and is again the mirror of this:³ On the contrary, the author is convinced of a sort of identification between the architect and the clients without whom the villa would not be an expression of the identity, tastes and habits of the family that inhabits it. The ideal house thus became the middle-class family house and in a short time would translate into a "house type", deprived of every individual characteristic through an adherence to the aesthetics of the machine civilization. Lidia Morelli herself ended her handbook by describing the house of the Modern as «THE HOUSE WE MUST HAVE»,⁴ but would continue to support the idea of a variety of types which avoid the monotony of a series that is too accentuated, as shown by the model homes created in Monza for the 4th Triennale.⁵

2. Instructions for interiors in Italian magazines: personalization, memory, and standards

The Italian architectural magazines, born late with respect to the corresponding European publications, developed like the latter in close connection with the decorative arts: the first titles *Architettura e Arti Decorative* (1921-31), *Domus. Architettura e arredamento dell'abitazione moderna in città e in campagna* (1928) and *La Casa Bella. Arti e industrie per l'arredamento* (1928) being a demonstration of this. The first two quickly took different directions, while *Domus* has always retained an interest in every aspect of life and of the house, including interiors, furniture, art and life itself (recipes, plant care, reviews of books, CDs, shows), managing to convey the sentiment of the hearth and home. The ambitious programme of *Domus*, the work of its founder Gio Ponti, was to descend to the reality of the "Italian-style house", one in line with the reformed dwellings promoted by rationalism but deeply rooted in the art, environment, and culture of Italy, the first example realized being the various domūs of Via De Togni (1931-36).⁶ Diversified in appearance but united by objectives and principles, the "typical houses" grew against the background of a structured educative intention which the magazine promoted by giving advice and showing projects (furniture designs such as relaxing armchairs or conversation corners, lounges, etc.)⁷ which its readers could adopt with the support of architects

³ Lidia Morelli, *La casa che vorrei avere* (Hoepli: Milan, 1931), 103.

⁴ Morelli, *La casa* ..., 311.

⁵ Morelli, *La casa*..., 309-313.

⁶ Fulvio Irace, *Gio Ponti. La casa all'italiana* (Electa: Milan, 1988), 9-54.

⁷ "La poltrona da relax", *Domus*, n.° 12 (1928): 87; "Per la vostra casa l'architetto vi offre una serie di disegni e un progetto inediti", *Domus*, n.° 125 (1938): 38-40.

and artisans, approaching a modern living still open to customizable solutions. This was well understood also by the subsequent directors of the magazine, between 1941 and 1947, when Ponti had founded the new magazine *Stile*: in fact they kept the projects submitted (the work of Banfi, Belgiojoso and Peressutti, Bianchetti and Pea, Albini, etc.),⁸ but emphasized the economic and technical feasibility, flanking the designs with a description of the works and quantities, promoting the repeatability of furnishings designed using standardized elements. Then Ernesto N. Rogers,⁹ during his short stint as director immediately after the war, would assert that the role of the architect was to make the ideal concrete, proposing examples that had been built, housing created by young architects such as Paolo Chessa, Vico Magistretti or Mario Tedeschi capable of mediating between a dramatic contingent reality and dreams.



Figure 3: The house “without an architect” by Donna Rita Puccini in Milan
Source: *Stile*, n.° 2 (1941)

For his part, Ponti continued to pursue the same objective in the pages of *Stile*, showing interiors where made-to-measure and off-the-shelf furniture coexisted happily with sentimental items (e.g. the M. and D. apartments and the Sala works in Milan by Luigi Caccia Dominioni)¹⁰ and also interiors “without an architect”, totally dictated by personal taste (the home of Donna Rita Puccini), “evocative” of the past.¹¹ It was the insight that two different ways of understanding interiors could coexist which, in the Fifties, would lead to a review of the concepts of type and standards to make them belong more closely to the needs of dwelling, varying them in line with differing situations. Thus, in anticipation of future reconstruction, the furnishing designs provided by *Stile* were transformed into “typical furniture”, produced by industry: lightweight and folding, but durable with respect to time, fashion and removals. One example is the home furniture system that could be stowed away even in a cupboard, designed by Ponti for the firm SAFFA, a well-known producer of matches, but also of furniture, building components,

⁸ Giancarlo Palanti, “Saper scegliere il proprio alloggio d'affitto”, *Domus*, n.° 157 (1941): 13; “Come arredare e quanto costa. Architetti G. L. Banfi, L. B. Belgiojoso, E. Peressutti”, *Domus*, n.° 157 (1941): 14-23; “Come arredare e quanto costa. Architects A. Bianchetti and C. Pea”, *Domus*, n.° 158 (1941): 22-32; “Come arredare e quanto costa. L'arredamento di un alloggio in affitto progettato dall'architetto Franco Albini”, *Domus*, n.° 159 (1941): 20-41.

⁹ Ernesto Nathan Rogers, “Casa reale e casa ideale”, *Domus*, n.° 209 (1946): 2.

¹⁰ “Interni in città. Tre arredamenti dell'architetto Caccia”, *Stile*, n.° 2 (1941): 18-24.

¹¹ “Senza architetto”, *Stile*, n.° 2 (1941): 47.

and prefabricated houses in wood,¹² followed in 1946 by furniture that could be taken apart and reassembled by the user exported by the Danish firm Portex.¹³ the house in the coveted postwar period would retain all the cosiness of the domestic hearth but its interior and its furnishings must be increasingly flexible, in harmony with the freedom and demands of a reborn democratic society.

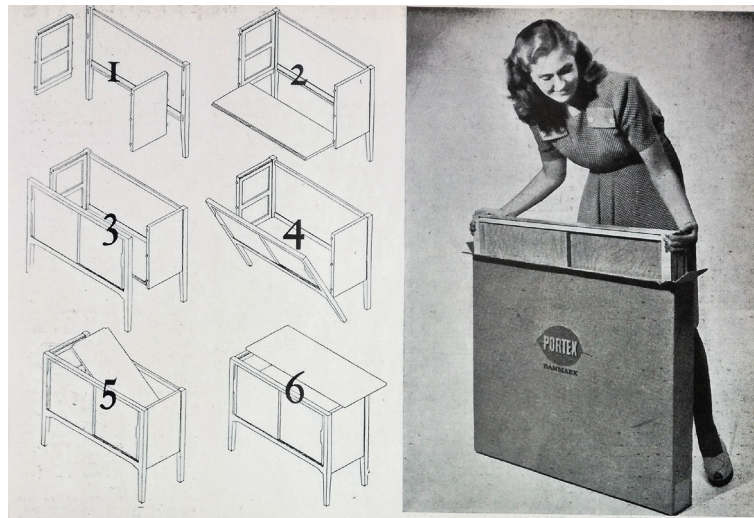


Figure 4: The modular furniture of the Danish company Portex
Source: *Stile*, n.° 1 (1946)

In fact, once over the emergency of immediate reconstruction, what *Stile* advocated was emerging throughout Europe and manifested through the need to apply corrections to the total repeatability of the standard. A significant witness of this was an article that appeared in *Domus* in 1956 which emphasized the importance of varying series by combining modules differing in form or decoration as much for furnishings as finishes for interiors, thus avoiding a uniformity which was by then perceived as stultifying.¹⁴ And this renewed freedom was promoted by the close on ten flourishing magazines in Italy based on the examples of *Domus* and *Stile*, which summarized and updated their descriptions, specializing in taking a closer look at certain aspects of living, partially summarized by their titles: *A. Attualità Architettura Abitazione Arte* of Lina Bo, Carlo Pagani and Bruno Zevi (1946), *Casa Novità* of Piera Peroni (1961), the future *Abitare* which still exists, *Prospettive* of Carlo E. Rava (1951-63), *La casa nuova* of Sergio Cobolli Gigli and Giorgio Monico (1952-55), *Casa e Turismo* (1954-64), *Casa e Giardino* (later *Ville&Giardini*, 1956-until now), *La casa & il giardino* (1966-81), *Rivista dell'arredamento* (later *Interni*, 1955-until now), *Artecasa* (1959-65), and *Arredare* (1963-66).

¹² Gio Ponti, "La casa entro l'armadio", *Stile*, n.° 42 (1944): 40.

¹³ "Quel che insegnano i Danesi per l'esportazione dei mobili per la casa per tutti", *Stile*, n.° 1 (1946): 9.

¹⁴ "Piastrelle componibili", *Domus*, n.° 322 (1956): 49.

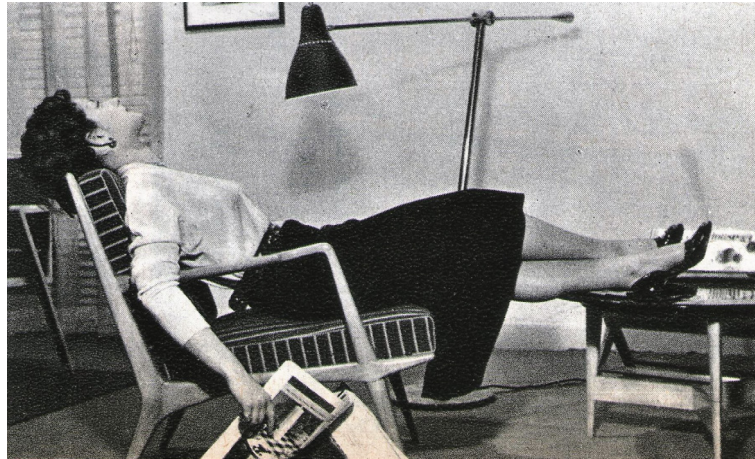


Figure 5: The free casualness of the lounge
Source: *La casa nuova*, n.° 1 (1952)

But not only that: television too was preparing its first programmes dedicated to interiors, such as *Il piacere della casa* (1956-61), presented by Paolo Tilche and Mario Tedeschi where “the house for all” of the rationalist mould evolved, driven by new demands and a renewed relationship with household objects, as Ettore Sottsass had already argued and would continue with the drastic and provocative proposals of the Seventies. The kitchen was no longer a mere workshop: it went back to accommodating family life under the impulse of the American models, while in the dwelling the partitions in masonry decreased, to be replaced by folding or cupboard walls (like the “storage wall” of George Nelson) making the internal divisions potentially variable. The unanimously accepted lounge had low tables on which one could even sit to chat informally; in the 1960s-70s it would be the modular nature of the chairs and the mobility of the furniture that brought an adaptability “tailored” to each situation and the time of day. But if all of this was ascribable to the critical re-reading and evolution of standard principles, also antique or sentimental objects survived alongside the off-the-shelf pieces, in line with the insight of *Stile* and the example of certain Italian masters (Franco Albini, the BBPR, Luigi Caccia Dominioni, Vico Magistretti, etc.): the memory of family roots or those evocative of history and art (often the prerogative of new collectors), these objects continued to be perceived as “personalizing” ingredients that fostered the sense of *chez soi*, even in the latest anthropological research and marketing promoted by the Swedish company IKEA.

3. The house of the new millennium: the end of “type” and the apotheosis of personalization?

Furniture companies such as IKEA or firms which managed the sale of new apartments such as the Milan Contract District bear witness to the fact that in the era of globalization it seems necessary to inspire individualism in order to sell off-the-shelf items, diversifying them in a shrewd “made-to-measure” operation. It is here that IKEA takes its cue from the IKEA Hackers, the *bricoleurs* of the new millennium:¹⁵ if the Hackers adapt and transform the company’s products at their leisure, combining elements in a personal manner different from the one recommended, then IKEA invents furnishings customizable by the customer such as the

¹⁵ “IKEA Hacked. Our Products. Your Ideas”, on *Ikeamuseum.com* website, 4 May 2018, last consulted on 10 September 2018.

Delaktig seating/bed system designed in collaboration with Tom Dixon. The watchword of the project is “create your own comfort”:¹⁶ it is possible to move or remove the seatbacks, replace the covers, or add tables depending on the use and needs of the buyer. Milan Contract District, for its part, prepared “CasAmpère”, a whole operational apartment inside the Milanese novAmpère construction site, so that potential customers can sample a real home experience, in a refined design context, even being invited to dinner. This almost seems like a return of the “type”, complete in every detail, instead, the general manager of the company stresses that it is possible to make changes to the colours and finishing or add additional features (in this case an Ernestomeda kitchen and Lema cupboards) and even change the layout or utilities systems (albeit to a lesser extent).¹⁷ It is even possible to equip the dwelling with a vertical garden, a green wall composed of different species of plants selected by the future inhabitant from among a hundred tropical essences.



Figure 6: CasAmpère. The lounge/kitchen and the green walls

Source: *Impresa Rusconi (website)*, consulted on November 1, 2018, <https://www.impresarusconi.it>

Vitra, at the 2018 Salone del Mobile, for the display called “Typecasting” curated by Robert Stadler, presented “Communals” – solutions for the communal areas of co-housing, but recalls: «Nevertheless, we have a constant need to affirm our individuality».¹⁸ Finally, observing the TV channels on the home which, in the wake of the American HGTV (Home & Garden TV) have reached Europe and favoured the birth of indigenous counterparts (*Leonardo*, today *Case Design Stili*, in Italy), we can observe the emergence of an unrestrained passion for home DIY that includes restructuring: the promised objective is to create a house tailored to its owner’s needs in terms of space, finishing and furnishings, eliminating any previous idea of “type” in a myriad solutions and adaptations. Arrays of technicians, artisans, decorators and real estate brokers seem to fulfil the individual dream with ease, especially if it is in tune with the inspiration of the designer: in TV programmes on the home today, unlike those of the Fifties, every solution

¹⁶ “Delaktig. Crea il tuo comfort”, on *Ikea.com* website, undated, last consulted on 10 September 2018.

¹⁷ Emiliano Sgambato, “Quando il capitolato è di design e 4.0: come cambia l’acquisto della casa”, on *Il Sole 24 Ore* website, 22 May 2018, last consulted on 10 September 2018.

¹⁸ *Typecasting. Exhibition Guide* (Milan: Vitra, Pelota, 2018), 2.

seems possible providing it is impressive, quite ignoring the educative principles and intent (beyond any delectable) of the early broadcasts.

4. Conclusion

The pace of life, the profound social changes and different habits, the world truly becoming a “global village” thanks to the Internet reveal the growing need to define one’s own *chez soi* but also a “place” that is recognizable geographically and psychologically. Analyses by the real estate market already warned us of this, with the news that future house buyers mainly choose on the basis of the desired location (for work or sentimental reasons, memories, etc.) and relegate to second place the layout of the house, which they dedicate themselves to after carefully selecting the “place”.¹⁹ The philosopher Marc Augé argues that the change in scale produced by the cancellation of physical and temporal boundaries has generated a constant search for “places” where people can develop social relations that have been made more precarious by metropolitan living but are still indispensable for individual development.²⁰ In this perspective, the destruction of the “type” could be read as an extreme attempt to curb the change and find refuge in a space that is strongly characterized by always being unambiguously identified and linked to the personality of the individual. The house should therefore be able to generate the feeling of “*chez soi*”, like the dwellings of the Fifties, “emotional houses” according to Alessandro Mendini, theatre stages enmeshed in daily life and complements indispensable for existence.²¹ But, according to Augé, it should also be open to the outside and introject or recreate part of the lost social relations that the urban fabric, neighbourhood and city no longer know how to create: they seem to demonstrate a dwelling behaviour developed spontaneously such as the co-housing or share-housing that have been spreading recently. Potential new housing models which seem to respond to the «need for “places” where individual identity is built up in contact with others»,²² while safeguarding the margin for individual statement, as the Vitra guide to the Typecasting exhibition says. Creating new bonds and perhaps representing the “Heterotopia” which Foucault spoke of, i.e. forms of utopias created by managing to reconcile collective and individual expressions of dwelling.

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¹⁹ Roberto Grasso, *Antropologia immobiliare* (San Cesario di Lecce: Manni, 2013), 17-36.

²⁰ Marc Augé, “La fine della preistoria dell’umanità come società planetaria”, in *Le case dell’uomo. Abitare il mondo* (Utet: Turin 2016), 7-12.

²¹ Alessandro Mendini, “La casa ‘emozionale’”, in *Le case dell’uomo...*, 56-68.

²² Marc Augé, “La fine...”, 9.

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