

The Form of Otium

Labor and Leisure in Greek and Roman Domestic Space

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Detail of the fresco in the triclinium of the villa di Livia, 30-20 BCE;
Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Rome.

Beyond the many things that made Greek and Roman culture fundamentally different from each other—opposite, even—they both shared a contempt for work.⁰¹ This might come as no surprise, as both the ancient Greeks and the ancient Romans based their material existence on the exploitation of slaves, and yet, no other slave society since has developed such a deeply ingrained hatred for work at large. Even what our modern ethos sees as fulfilling, free work, was seen in the ancient Mediterranean as the unworthy burden of material life, as opposed to the meaningful and noble (non)occupation of “*scholé*” or “*otium*”: doing nothing.⁰² Of course, this doing nothing could only exist as the flip side of war, slavery, and the subordination of women; and yet in its starkness, this dialectic of work and leisure, labor and *otium*, presents an interesting contrast to contemporary experience.

Mature capitalism has taught us to love work as we would leisure, and to invest in leisure the energy and planning that we would devote to work. Both our vocabulary and our spaces have registered this shift: while we talk about “fun” and “passion” at work, we increasingly bring our laptops into our beds. If such a blurring of domains can be seen as a form of exploitation, as our whole being is essentially put to work, there is also a positive aspect to this dynamic: our houses don’t work anymore the way they are supposed to—and that, we would argue, is a good thing.⁰³ In fact, today’s houses are the outcome of a long historical process that has defined, in increasingly so-

01 Hannah Arendt articulated this peculiarity of ancient Mediterranean cultures by distinguishing labour – that which supports survival – from work, which, supposedly, leaves a permanent trace and has a higher ambition, such as, for instance, the work of a craftsman or artist. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013 [1958]).

02 For the Greek *scholé* see William K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy: Volume 5, The Later Plato and the Academy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 89. An in-depth discussion of the topic can be found in Kostas Kalimtzis, *An Inquiry in the Philosophical Concept of Scholé* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017). For the Latin *otium*, see J. P. Toner, *Leisure and Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995), in particular chapter 3.

03 We refer here to the recent philosophical and political critique of immaterial labor put forward, between others, by Paolo Virno, Christian Marazzi, and Franco Berardi. See Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009).

phisticated terms, the roles humans are supposed to play within their walls: master and servant, husband and wife, parents and children. The modern middle class apartment has naturalized these roles by giving to each their own space. In our 2-bedroom, living, bathroom, kitchen model apartment, the fracture between the post-work otium of the husband and the incessant domestic labor of the wife is more profound than ever, and yet, it is made invisible by its very pervasiveness; acceptable by its very efficiency.⁰⁴

In contrast to this modern model, the ancient Mediterranean world did not hide its asymmetries, but cultivated them, and in the case of the Roman “domus,” celebrated them, even. Looking at the “oikos” – the Greek domestic unit – and the domus offers an opportunity to rethink the way in which we conceive leisure and work: if today they blur into each other, and in modernity they have been constructed as complementary cogs in a machine, in antiquity they were existential categories with a profound capacity to shape and render legible both time and architecture. Understanding these archetypal examples can therefore become a way to rethink the distinction between laboring and non-laboring activities, and rearticulate the future of our domestic spaces.

ANDRON VS. OIKOS

Archaeological remains from the diverse constellation of settlements that make up the ancient Greek-speaking world present a quite clear chronological shift from one-room dwellings to multiple-room dwellings. The one-room dwelling is defined as “megaron,” a term often used also to refer to the main hall of a vaster complex.⁰⁵ And indeed, in its simplicity, the megaron did present something of a monumental character in hosting a variety of functions, both pragmatic and symbolic. It was both a temple and a place for sleeping close to the warmth of a fire; the space of craft, and of childrearing; the social locus of drinking and discussing, but also the protective vessel that sheltered foodstuffs and supplies. In this early stage of the Greek-speaking civilization, of which we have no written record,⁰⁶ it is difficult to imagine leisure and work as two spatially defined realms. And while there was likely a temporal distinction between days of feast and normal days, due to the rhythms of agrarian and pastoral production, ritual permeated most aspects of life—even those we’d associate to work today. Like many forms of prehistoric dwelling structures, the megaron functioned as “theatres of everyday life,” places in which inhabitants would ritualize every moment of their life.

It was only later, from the seventh century BC onwards, that archaeological findings substantiate the shift from the megaron to the multi-room dwelling, commonly called the “oikos.”⁰⁷ Interestingly, these findings show that rather than adding rooms to a megaron, the oikos emerged by subdivision of the megaron itself. A clear example of this are the excavations at Zagora, where larger one-room buildings were reorganized as sets of smaller chambers.⁰⁸ While it has not been possible to propose a typological explanation of the uses of these different rooms, the relatively simultaneous emergence of a multi-room dwelling model across the Greek world testifies to the growing complexity of social and productive hierarchies, and therefore, to an increasing distinction between leisure and work, ritual and daily life, politics and domesticity. Zagora is a good example of how critical mass allows for a town to become detached

04 For a critique of domestic space as the place of reproductive labour see Nicole Cox, Silvia Federici, *Counter-Planning from the Kitchen. Wages for Housework: A Perspective on Capital and the Left* (New York: Falling Wall, 1975).

05 Valentin Müller, “Development of the ‘Megaron’ in Prehistoric Greece”, in *American Journal of Archaeology* 48, n. 4 (1948), 342-348.

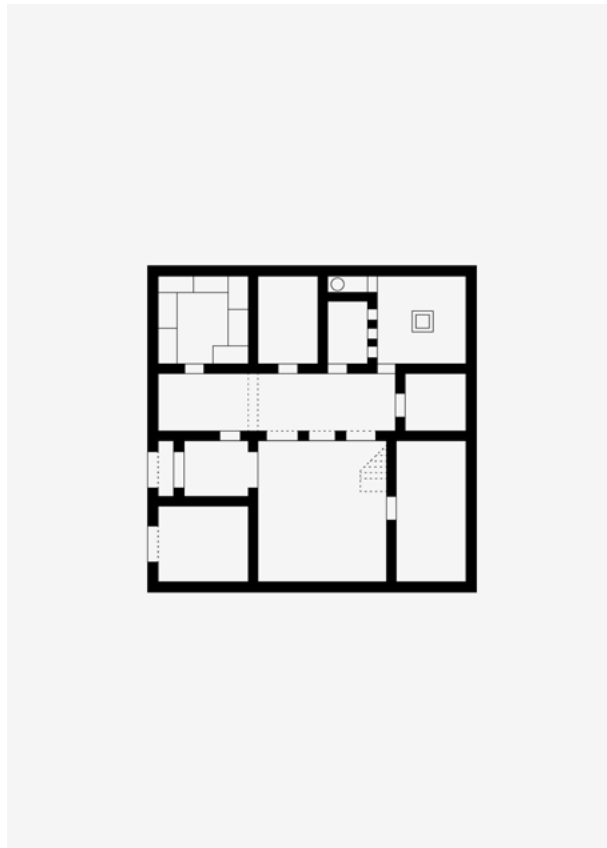
06 The earliest extant traces of Greek text date back to the 9th century but it is only after the 7th century that we start to have a consistent body of literature we can use as proof of daily practices.

07 Lisa C. Nevett, “House-form and Social Complexity: The Transformation of Early Iron Age Greece”, chapter 2 of *Domestic Space in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 22-42.

08 Alexandra Cocouzei, “From Megaron to Oikos at Zagora”, *British School at Athens Studies* 15 (2007): 169-181.

from the rhythm of fields and pastures and begin to construct what we could call a budding urban culture. It is at this moment, with the development of urban culture, that the ritualistic aspects of life start to become distinct from domestic routine, becoming more collective and institutionalized through, for instance, the establishment of temples and sanctuaries. Work is then identified the condition of everyday life, of survival, production, and routine, interrupted by ritual moments of non-work: feasts, festival, sacrifices, rites of passage, but also political meetings, theatre, and sports.⁰⁹

Ritual, or non-work, thus emerges in the morphological development of ancient Greek settlements not only as a temporal construct, but also as a spatial fact. Furthermore, this separation between the world of the house and the world of the town is sharpened by the coagulation of the public sphere into something we could call political sphere. It is at this point that *scholé* (idleness, or doing nothing), becomes an actual intellectual pursuit for the free male citizens, one which requires the complete emancipation from any form of physical toil (and its execution by women, lower classes, or slaves).¹⁰ By the sixth century, poleis across the Greek world would feature different versions of a single urban model with a number of consistent characteristics: a settlement where recognized places of worship, politics, and intellectual engagement are clearly separated from the domestic environments in which both production and reproduction take place. *Scholé* does not coincide with politics, but together, they constitute the opposite of labor, particularly as it is identified by “*ponos*”: the daemon of physical toil and a symbol of inferior existence, shackled by the needs of basic survival.



Plan of a house in Olynthus, Greece, ca. 450 BCE. Drawn by author.
The room on the top left corner is the *andron*, or reception room. The top right corner is occupied by the *oecus* complex, comprising three rooms equipped with a chimney, a well, and cooking equipment.

09 The theme of the ‘otherness’ of ritual time and space is the subject of Mircea Eliade’s seminal *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959).

10 For a discussion of the family structure in the *oikos*, see Cynthia Patterson, *The Family in Greek History* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1998).

HOUSE IN OLINTHOS, 5TH, 4TH CENTURY BCE

The distinction between work and leisure not only impacted the structure of the polis by outlining a strong contrast between the “public” realm of the agora and the “private” domain of the house, but also shaped the internal logic of dwellings. If the formal arrangement of rooms may vary drastically from one settlement to the other, by and large the poleis demonstrated a striking consistency in the key spaces that comprised a dwelling. A series of functionally undefined spaces, all more or less of the same size, would be clustered around a courtyard or a portico, and be complemented by two rooms that distinguish themselves for their particular features: a room equipped with a well and a large chimney or hearth, and a decorated room lined with a built-in bench. The first, the space for handling fire and water—a mixture of contemporary kitchen and bathroom—is what archaeologists refer to as “oikos,” the very word that we use today to define the Greek house.¹¹ The second, the decorated room, was called the “*andron*,” which literally means the place for or of men. It is in the andron that the most peculiarly Greek form of leisure took place: the symposium.¹²

Recent archaeological analyses have shown that the gender separation portrayed by much Greek literature was more of an ideological construct than a reality, and that in fact, women and men, crafts and childrearing, mixed relatively freely in the house.¹³ Differences were choreographed in time rather than in space, making use of the rooms that offered the best environmental conditions in a given moment. The homogeneity and lack of differentiation of most rooms is a testament to this fact. The symposium, however, is an exception to this rather flexible pattern of life. Like all the other rooms of the house, the andron was, most of the time, used indifferently by all age groups and both genders, as we know from the fact that loom weights and other female craft traces have been found in andrones during archaeological digs.¹⁴

However, on certain nights, the andron gained his name by becoming the absolute domain of the free men of the house, their male guests, and the “*hetairai*,” the courtesans they would hire. With its own side entrance and marked by a small, but heavy door often requiring special metal hinges, the andron was separated from the rest of the house. Its decoration represented the status of its owner, and would often be expressed on the outside of the house as well.¹⁵ On its benches, the guests would meet to drink, but never to eat: eating could be construed either as a fact of necessity or as a public ritual activity, but never an activity of leisure.¹⁶ Drinking wine, that most unnecessary of actions, perfectly embodied the unnecessary—and therefore free—character of the event. Music, political discussions, philosophical debates, sexual play, and poetry were all integral parts of this practice which can neither defined as public—as the group was very small and intimate—nor private—as its implications often directly impacted political alliances.¹⁷

Not burdened by the religious significance that both sports and theatre carried with them, the symposium was the truest, if not perhaps the only experience of leisure in ancient Greece.¹⁸ It is in the protected capsule of

11 Lisa C. Nevett, *House and Society in the Ancient Greek World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

12 *Ibid.*, 53-79.

13 *Ibid.*, 31; 155.

14 Lisa C. Nevett, “A Space for ‘Hurling the Furniture’? Architecture and the Development of Greek Domestic Symposia”, chapter 3 of *Domestic Space in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 43-62.

15 *Ibid.*

16 By and large the Greek world had a diffused tradition of sacrificial banqueting that created a strong demarcation between ritual eating and everyday eating for sustenance; neither was seen as a pleasure. Although the Greeks were, for this reason, far less obsessed with the enjoyment of food than the Romans, there would still be exceptions – see James N. Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens*, with a specific focus on parties in “Part I: Feasts” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

17 On the symposium as a ritual, see Jason König, *Saints and Symposiasts: The Literature of Food and the Symposium in the Greco-Roman and Early Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3-29.

18 James N. Davidson describes in vivid terms the distinction between ritual eating and entertainment, and pure leisure, in *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens*, with a specific focus on parties in “Part I: Feasts” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

the andron that idleness was elevated to the highest art of being and freed of necessity. It is perhaps impossible for us today to understand how alcohol-fueled private parties that often degenerated into brawls, sex romps, or both, could also be the cradle of poetry, philosophy, and political theory. And yet, it was in the gratuitous nature of the symposium that the Greeks saw a possibility for true intellectual freedom.

The opposite of the andron was the oikos, the utilitarian core of all things laborious: from food storage to cooking and cleaning. The oikos was as plain and accessible as the andron was decorated and sheltered. However, as previously mentioned, outside of the temporal suspension caused by the symposium, the use of these spaces was not so rigidly defined as Xenophon and Isocrates would have us believe.¹⁹ We could therefore say that the distinction between work and leisure in ancient Greece was more of an ideological construct enacted in time, rather than an actual fact that scripted physical space. Thus, the andron and oikos were not tools to enforce specific behaviors, but rather the ancient Greeks' attempt to give the division of gender and labor representative form. The other rooms of the Greek house would be either used with seasonal flexibility or rented out. In fact, the divide between work and leisure was, for the Greeks, an existential fact, not a matter of function. In this, the Greek house profoundly differs from the modern apartment, which choreographs gender roles without clearly expressing the asymmetries it constructs.

ATRIUM VS. CUBICULUM

If the ancient Greeks' most significant typological invention is perhaps the agora, which was an eminently urban space, the religious and political fulcrum of the city, the ancient Romans—who were largely disenchanted by politics—invented the most anti-urban of all architectural archetypes: the patrician villa which embodies the idea of a pastoral retreat from the public pressure of the city.²⁰ Yet within the history of western domestic space, the villa is not extravagant, but rather the quintessential manifestation of the patrician Roman domus: a private microcosm owned by the *pater familias* and devoted simultaneously to their otium and the display of wealth and power.²¹ Whether urban or rural, the Roman domus was a paradox: a place of both private retreat and public display whose importance in Roman society far exceeded the intimacy of private life.²² Contrary to the ancient Greeks for whom, as we have seen, the house was clearly separated from the public sphere, wealthy Romans understood their house as a “public space,” a veritable “forum” within which to frame their interaction with the extra-domestic space of guests, friends, allies, and even strangers.

Rather than a private space hidden from view, the Roman house evolved as a place of interaction in which the possibility of otium had to be negotiated with both the privilege and the duty to open the house for public presentation. As argued by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, a wealthy Roman citizen “went home not so much to shield himself from public gaze, as to present himself in the best light.”²³ Although dedicated to the otium of the *pater familias*, being constantly under the pressure of public scrutiny, a gaze that measured the prestige of the homeowner with the success of his household,

19 Lisa C. Nevett, *House and Society in the Ancient Greek World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 53-79. The gender hierarchy of the Greek *oikos* is well explained in Joseph Roisman, *The Rhetoric of Manhood: Masculinity in the Attic Orators* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 26-41.

20 On the Roman Villa see the fundamental study of this typology in James Ackerman, *The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1993), 15-28.

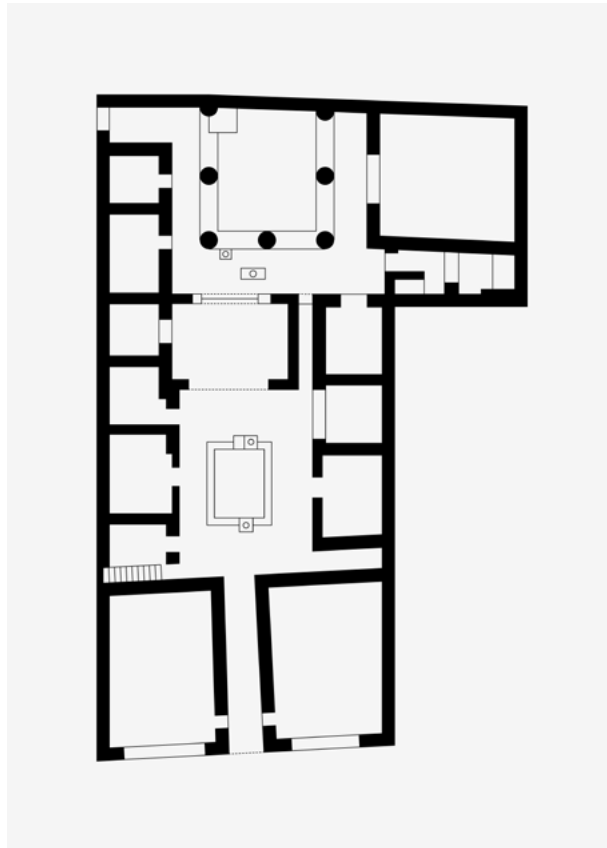
21 On the publicness of the Roman Domus see: Shelley Hales, *The Roman House and Social Identity* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11-39.

22 On the public role of Household prestige see: Kate Cooper, “Closely Watched Households: Visibility, Exposure, and Private Power in the Roman “Domus”” In *Past & Present* n.197 (November 2007): 3-33.

23 Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, “The Social Structure of the Roman House” in *Papers of The British School of Rome*, Vol. 56 (1988): 46.

made the Roman domus a rather hostile space for idleness. In order to see how the architecture of the domus framed the conflict between otium and public pressure, we first have to understand its political nature.

The word “domus” comes from the Indo-European root *dem-* (“to build,” as in Greek *domos*, “built space”), but in the Roman world this root gave origin to declensions such as *dominus* and *dominion* whose meaning addressed the undisputable power of the pater familias over its possession and family. The family itself, as congregation of relatives and slaves, was the primary possession of the pater familias, and in fact familia comes from the Latin word “*famuli*,” which meant slaves. The domus was thus the stronghold of the Roman proprietor, whose role was acknowledged by the ruling authorities as the very foundation of Roman society. Especially with the rise of the Empire, in the first century CE, the subordination of the household to the pater familias was believed to mirror the way in which society was subordinated to the paternal and yet severe power of the Emperor.²⁴ It is possible to argue that the Roman domus was conceived of as a place whose main architectural purpose was to “theatricalize” the power of the pater familias and make him ostensibly visible to both those inside and outside the family.



Plan of the so-called House of the Tragic Poet, Pompeii, ca. 79 CE.
 Drawn by author. The room at the center of the house, between the entrance atrium and the *peristylum* garden at the back, is the *tablinum*, the space of the paterfamilias.

²⁴ On the symbolic relationship between *Pater Familia* and Emperor see: Judith B. Perkins, “The “Passion of Perpetua”: a Narrative of Empowerment” in: *Latomus*, Vol. 53, Fasc. 4 (October, November 1994): 837-847.

HOUSE OF THE TRAGIC POET,
POMPEII, 2nd CENTURY BCE

The architecture of the Roman domus, as embodied by the Pompeian house, was spatially organized along a visual axis that connected the more “public” rooms of the house: the entrance, the *atrium*, the *tablinum*, or the patriarch’s room, and finally the *peristyle*, a courtyard that gave access to the most private spaces situated at the rear of the house. A remarkable feature of the patrician domus was that the entrance was always open; people from the street could not only peek inside the house, but also enter the atrium at will. Being easily accessible from the entrance, the atrium was the veritable forum of the house in which the pater familias would perform the ritual of *salutatio*, the morning greeting of his cohort of *clientes*. Directly overlooking the atrium and in axis with the entrance, the tablinum was where the pater familias would conduct his business in full view of those standing in the atrium, the entrance, and even the peristyle.

The *triclinium*, the dining room in which the household owner would entertain his guests with banquets enjoyed while lying on a couch, was another public space of the house. Accessible from the peristyle, the form of the *triclinium* was generous and ceremonial in order to convey an adequate public presentation of the house to guests.²⁵ Unlike the andron, the parties held in the triclinium were accessible to both male and female guests, and it was precisely in such occasions that gender hierarchies were relaxed. Yet contrary to the andron, this space was rarely used by family members when guests were not present. Hidden from the visual axis that celebrated the power of the pater familias were all those spaces whose function was did not contribute directly to the public display of the house, such as the *culina* (kitchen), *latrina* (bathroom), and *cubicula*, spaces that can be defined—albeit reductively—as bedrooms.

What can be made of the Roman’s spatial division between work and leisure that for the Greeks had such a strong ideological goal? Even though the organization of the Roman domus gave more emphasis to the specialization of rooms and to the hierarchy between more and less public and private rooms, the dialectic between labor and leisure was, for them, infinitely more ambiguous. The ostensibly hedonist life of a wealthy Roman citizen could only be supported by an active contingent of slaves that was not easy to hide from the main public view of the house. In the domus there was no specific place where to house slaves, and their presence, day and night, was ubiquitous. While they conducted an existence of exploitation, they also had a full opportunity to watch their masters’ family life in all its private vicissitudes.²⁶ Moreover, the prestige of the pater familias was so bound to the good functioning of the domus that those subordinated to his rule were de facto much more empowered than their social position would entail. Because the economic performance of the domus was a very important political attribute for the pater familias, working activities, but also the storage of goods could take place in the atrium, making the latter an effective tableau of the virtues of domestic life.

It was precisely the social pressure exemplified by the public role of the atrium that turned small spaces—such as the cubiculum—into the true place of otium in the Roman domus. Yet it is important to remark that cubicula were not seen as a proper space for otium, since their very small proportions made them the opposite of generous and beautiful rooms like the triclinium. Cubicula were dark and stuffy, and thus usable mainly for sleep, minor work tasks, and child caring. Yet these rather unwelcoming rooms became, or were appropriated, as spaces for otium because they offered the only retreat from the rather hectic space of the Roman domus. As such, cubicula were not only places for sex, informal chat, and receptions, but also places for

25 For an accurate analysis of the *triclinium* as place of both conviviality and power display see Lisa C. Nevett, *Domestic Space in Classical Antiquity*, 119-141.

26 Kate Cooper, ‘Closely Watched Households: Visibility, Exposure, and Private Power in the Roman “Domus”’, 7.

concentration, studying, silence, and above all, contemplation. This is the reason why cubacula would become the privileged places for early Christian worship when their faith was not yet officially, and peacefully recognized.²⁷

Unlike other ancient cults, Christianity gave unprecedented importance to the individual relationship with God, thus making potentially solitary conditions such as the cubiculum the ideal representation of introspection. The very option of locking oneself in a cubiculum, out of sight, became the root for a new idea of the self and individuality, which eventually triumphed with Christianity itself. Within a society that made politics into relentless social networking, retreating from public life became the prerogative of those who could afford the luxury of being alone. Leisure thus was not just not-work, but rather being protected from too much public interaction. It is in this way that otium as a possibility to be away from public interaction became the root of one of the most influential ascetic practices of the western world: monasticism. As paradoxical as it may seem, it was precisely the permissive space of the cubiculum that was the very archetype of the ascetic hermit cell.

The parable of the Roman cubiculum shows how typological solutions can be misinterpreted and appropriated. As we have seen, the polarity of work and leisure was the very dialectic at the root of the way Greeks and Romans shaped their houses, and ultimately, their life. Today, we are perhaps like the late Romans: at odds with a typological model we've inherited; a model in which the house is supposed to be the sole realm of leisure and reproduction. But reproduction, as feminism teaches us, is not leisure; and work cannot be kept out of the house. The end of the Roman world shows how there might already be space for subversion in the tools we've been given. Perhaps we are just not using them in the right way yet.

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27 On the cubiculum as place of Christian worship see: Kristina Sessa, "Christianity and the Cubiculum: Spiritual Politics and Domestic Spaces in Late Antique Rome" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 15, No. 2 (Summer 2007): 171-204.

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