

Animal House: Domestic Space as an Ecological Project

Feral Partnerships



Porch at Grey Gardens. *Grey Gardens*, directed by Albert and David Maysles (1975; Chicago: HomeVision Entertainment, 1975).

Ecology,⁰¹ is a field of study rooted in the home, with the term itself meaning, “the study of the house,” stemming from the ancient Greek *oikos*.⁰² In an era of anthropogenic biodiversity loss and extinction, the human home is a critical site of inquiry, informing how humans might better cohabit with other animals, plants, and living organisms. Despite this, domestic space remains an often-overlooked topic in ecological research.⁰³

This paper foregrounds the home as a contested site of ecological transformation. Our focus is centered on two projects that came into being during the 1970s: *Grey Gardens*, in the Hamptons, New York; and *Plumwood Mountain*, in Yuin Country outside Canberra, Australia. The occupants of these houses challenged the ideals regulating Western domestic space through their multispecies and eco-feminist approaches to dwelling.

We measure these case studies against an analysis of prevailing Western domestic ideals, taking snapshots through a long and complex history. Tracing back to the ancient Greek *oikos* and the colonial villa typology, we explore these ideals through three key ecological and architectural characteristics: seclusion; autonomy; and separation. Through this exploration, we illustrate how enduring ideas surrounding domestic boundaries limit opportunities for multispecies cohabitation and interspecies care. The shifting and hardening of these boundaries over time is linked to changing attitudes to public and private property, modes of

- 01 Ecology is the study of an organism’s interactions with their environment, including their relationships with other living beings and physical surroundings. See “Definition of Ecology,” Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies.
- 02 The *oikos* was the basic unit of society in the classical Greek city-state, whose meaning incorporated the house, home, family, and domestic property.
- 03 Ecologists are preoccupied with the impacts of human homes replacing non-human homes in ‘wild’ spaces, resulting in the loss of both mundane and rare species, however such problems are typically absorbed into the historical trajectory of the urbanization and domestication of wild lands, understood as the large-scale clearing of forests, draining of wetlands, and centralization of power through the creation of human infrastructure. This scale and dualistic framing have tended to dominate the discourse, obscuring the human home as an ecological territory. In this paper we will attempt to identify some characteristics of Western domesticity which have contributed to this trend.

production, and gender relations, which have acted to detach the Western home from reciprocal ecological relationships, resulting in far-reaching impacts on humans and other-than-humans.

Our transgressive homemakers—the Edies at Grey Gardens and Val Plumwood at Plumwood Mountain—conceived their domestic spaces in connection with a wider ecology, cohabited by human and other-than-human beings. We are interested in how they experimented with the porosity and generosity of the architectural envelope, which was framed and maintained by lived practices of ecological care. Acting fifty years ago, when anthropogenic biodiversity loss was already in full flow, these case studies raise critical questions for envisaging a more just, ecological domestic architecture in the present.

TRANSGRESSION: GREY GARDENS

Situated at the intersection of 3 West End Road and Lily Pond Lane, East Hampton, New York, Grey Gardens is an expansive estate built in a style typical of New England villas at the turn of the nineteenth century. It features a generous external porch and its pediment recalls “colonial practice in mass and detail.”⁰⁴ A typically New England timber structure and naturally weathering shingles envelops a generous interior consisting of 28 rooms, familiarly arranged around a central entrance hall and stair. However, by the early 1970s, the house had become quite unlike any other in the village.

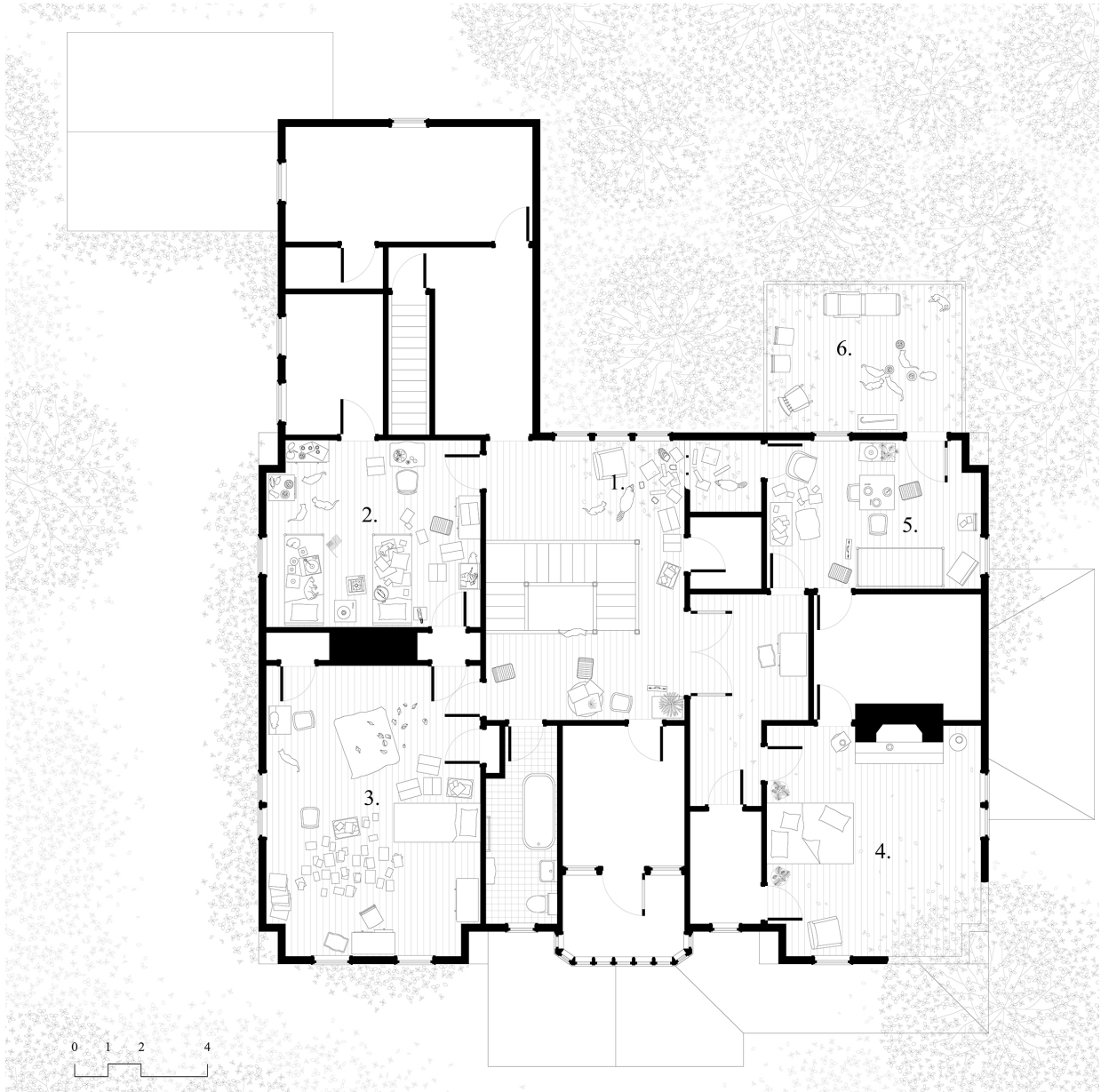
When seen from the road, Grey Gardens had become obscured by a tangle of ivy, wisteria, and honeysuckle: so overgrown that a canopy of sorts had formed, through which local children would crawl, hoping to catch a glimpse of the ‘abandoned haunted house.’ Yet the human residents of Grey Gardens were very much corporeal. They were a mother and daughter, both named Edith Bouvier Beale – known as ‘Big Edie’ and ‘Little Edie’ respectively, of the socially and politically prominent Bouvier family, close relatives of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. With them lived at least one dozen cats (numbering 300 in total over their time).

In 1975 they became the subjects of the documentary portrait *Grey Gardens*, directed by David and Albert Maysles. In the film’s opening scene, the viewer is immediately introduced to a complete conceptual and architectural breakdown of the boundaries of contemporary domesticity:

Big Edie: What are you doing down there? Just standing there? Cameraman: Just filming the main room.
 Little Edie: (Off screen) “Whiskers!”
 BE: Well, did you know that Whiskers has disappeared?
 LE: A cat got out. I’m trying to get him in.
 CM: Has he? Ah.
 BE: Yeah, we don’t know how he got out. I think he got out in that hole there.
 LE: No, I knew they were coming, and I...
 BE: I think he got out in that hole. He can jump up there.
 LE: I knew they were coming and...
 BE: Yeah. No, he got out in that hole, Edie.
 LE: I put them all out! You told me to!
 BE: No, dearie, he got out in the hole, babe.
 LE: ‘Take the cats out,’ you said.
 BE: Did you hear what I said, woman?
 LE: What?
 BE: He got out in this hole here. That was the noise we heard. That raccoon did that to my new wall. Isn’t that ter-



Exterior of Grey Gardens. *Grey Gardens*, directed by Albert and David Maysles (1975; Chicago: Home Vision Entertainment, 1975).



Reconstructed plan of Grey Gardens. Drawn by the authors. 1. Landing, 2. Yellow bedroom, 3. Boys' bedroom, 4. Former bedroom, 5. Pink bedroom, 6. Balcony.

rible? They'll have the whole house down soon.
LE: Yeah, we'll be raided again! We'll be raided again by
the village of East Hampton!⁰⁵



First-floor landing. *Grey Gardens*, directed by Albert and David Maysles (1975; Chicago: Home Vision Entertainment, 1975).

In this scene, we are confronted with a raccoon-made hole in the external envelope of the house, which seems to have facilitated Whiskers' (the cat) escape. The film grants us access to only a handful of the house's interior and exterior spaces—apparently those predominantly used by the Edies in their daily lives. Yet we can see many instances of a softening of the house's edges to other species—making domestic boundaries more porous. The surrounding landscape is described by Little Edie as a “complete sea of leaves,”⁰⁶ and is entirely untamed. A tree had grown through the ceiling of Big Edie's former bedroom. A fire had opened up a large area of the first-floor wall, exposing the building's timber frame and providing a vertical circulation route for raccoons retrieving slices of bread left out by Little Edie.

In the yellow bedroom shared by the Edies, we see a radical undoing of the room's traditional use,⁰⁷ with the Edies cooking and serving food to their human guests and feline cohabitants. While the attic, its floor covered entirely in newspapers and cat food, is given over entirely to non-human inhabitation:

Little Edie: Everything's in the attic, everything from sloths, otters, badgers, uh, possums, raccoons.⁰⁸

In her 1972 essay, “The Secret of Grey Gardens,” for *New York* magazine journalist Gail Sheehy describes a visit to the house. She recalls how “suddenly dust would scatter and... something leapt past our heads—a bat, no, a *cat*—flying to some ceiling perch,” to which Little Edie responds: “Only students of architecture can fully appreciate this place.”⁰⁹

05 *Grey Gardens*, directed by Albert and David Maysles (1975; Chicago: Home Vision Entertainment, 1975).

06 *Ibid.*

07 John David Rhodes, “‘Concentrated Ground’: *Grey Gardens* and the Cinema of the Domestic,” in *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 47, No. 1 (Spring 2006): 83-105.

08 *Grey Gardens*, directed by Albert and David Maysles (1975; Chicago: Home Vision Entertainment, 1975).

09 Gail Sheehy, “The Secret of Grey Gardens,” in *New York Magazine*, January 10, 1972.

Sheehy's first encounter with the Edies had occurred while vacationing in East Hampton the previous summer. Her daughter had discovered a box of abandoned rabbits by the side of the road. Having seen dozens of cats in the overgrowth of Grey Gardens, the little girl concluded that the owners of the house must love animals and ducked under the hedge with the bunnies. Little Edie emerged from the trees to meet her:

“Did you think we care for animals here?” The woman smiled and bent down close to the face of the child, who silently considered her ...

The child nodded solemnly: “This is an animal house.”

“You see! Children sense it.” The woman clapped her hands in delight. “The old people don't like us. They think I'm crazy. The Bouviers don't like me at all, Mother says. But the children understand.”¹⁰

In the film, we witness how the house facilitates moments of genuine affection between the Edies and their cohabiting cats. The manner in which the rooms are inhabited by the Edies, the cats, and the raccoons makes apparent the importance the women placed on the happiness and well-being of their animals. An examination of Grey Gardens and its inhabitation by the Edies, the cats, and the raccoons, would not be complete without touching on the most potent theme of animal cohabitation: *joy*.



Little Edie in the bedrooms. *Grey Gardens*, directed by Albert and David Maysles (1975; Chicago: Home Vision Entertainment, 1975).

However, both the film and these quotes, also convey the overwhelming hostility faced by the Edies: “we'll be raided by the village of East Hampton,” or “the old people don't like us.” The Edies were outcasts and were generally perceived as crazy ‘cat ladies,’ who had no place in waspy genteel

society.¹¹ An affinity emerges between the hostilities faced by the Edies and the treatment of madwomen and spinsters in New England Gothic — the body of literature depicting Puritan paranoia in the earliest days of colonial settlement. According to Faye Ringel, the defining themes of New England Gothic are “the women’s local color tradition of ghost stories, peculiar spinsters and madwomen in attics; the Northern version of Southern post-bellum Gothic, of family secrets, class warfare, decaying mansions; the real and imagined history of the witchcraft persecution, shunning, and resistance to change in local traditions; modern Suburban Gothic; domestic humor as Gothic; Freudian Psychological Gothic”¹² — all of which are potent here. The Edies embody aspects of these themes — they are spinsters, with Big Edie abandoned by her husband and society at large after her behavior began to deviate from that of “civilized femininity.”¹³ Little Edie, the ‘unfinished woman,’ is duty-bound to her mother and cats but harbors ambitions beyond the porch of her familial home. They inhabit a decaying villa; Grey Gardens serves a material index of the family’s affluence, conditioned by the residents’ (human and feline) non-conformist mode of inhabitation. Thus, the figure of the cat lady becomes inextricable from the house itself.

A third form of hostility the Edies faced was economic. East Hampton, once a sleepy summer resort favored by artists and bohemians for its seclusion, was by the 1970s the embodiment of the ‘locals versus newcomers’ schism. In the eyes of these wealthier arrivals from the nearby metropolis of New York, the Edies had lived beyond their time in East Hampton, and extreme measures were taken against these two women who threatened their local land and property values. The village enlisted Suffolk County’s sanitarians, detectives and ASPCA representatives in an effort to oust them. The fact that East Hampton was caught up in a “war of land values”¹⁴ cannot be ignored — it is precisely the conflicting ecological and economic dimensions of “the animal house” which invited such animosity from the community.

These conflicts allow us to de-familiarize prevalent attitudes to domestic space, which we will explore in turn. In relation to the interior are the divergent attitudes to multispecies cohabitation at play. The species diversity and distributed agency of occupants at Grey Gardens challenges the contemporary ideal of the domestic space as a more-or-less exclusively ‘human’ realm in character and ecology, irrespective of whether non-human cohabitants such as household pets are present. As we will show, this is a relatively recent and culturally specific development. However, more fundamentally, the radical porosity of the house to the exterior presented a direct threat to the Western ideal of a bounded, highly-controlled, and autonomous domestic space, in both ecological and economic terms.

11 The animosity towards “cat women” appears to be a relatively recent, Western phenomenon. The domestication of cats by women can be dated back to the first settled agrarian communities in 10,000 years BCE, where there is considerable archaeological evidence that suggests that cats were worshipped as deities and an integral part of ancient Egyptian life. See James Serpell, “Domestication and history of the cat,” in *The Domestic Cat: The Biology of its Behaviour*, eds. Dennis Turner and Patrick Bateson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 88; and Eric Faure and Andrew Kitchener, “An Archaeological and Historical Review of the Relationships between Felids and People,” in *Anthrozoös* 22, No. 3 (2009), 221-238. The origins of the cat lady construct are rooted in Medieval Christianity, while the modern characterization emerged in the late eighteenth century. After the Protestant Reformation of the 1540s, convents were dissolved, and patriarchs were without nunneries to which to send unmarried daughters. Consequently, vast numbers of women would become dependents in the households of relatives, and the housebound spinster with only a cat for companionship became a recognized archetype in Georgian England. Unmarried women were vilified for breaking convention and choosing to forgo marriage and motherhood, and their bonds formed with animal companions were deemed ‘unnatural.’ See Josephine Donovan and Carol Adams, *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 8.

12 Faye Ringel, “New England Gothic,” in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. Charles Crow (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 144.

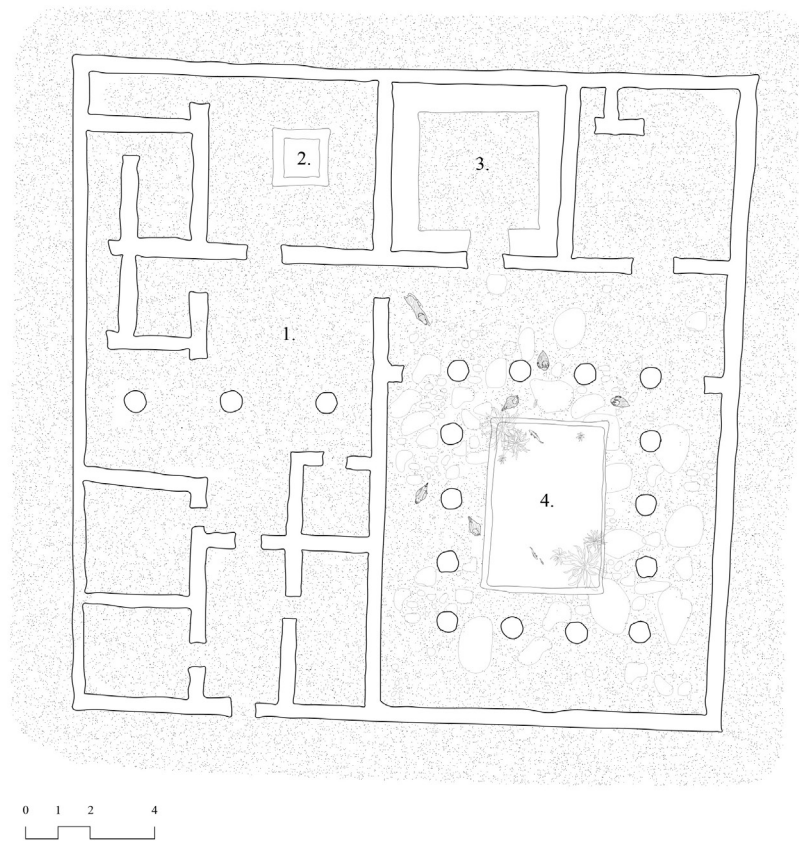
13 Sheehy, “The Secret of Grey Gardens.”

14 Ibid.

SECLUSION: THE OIKOS

The *oikos*, chosen as the root for the word *ecology* by German zoologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866, was an ancient Greek house-type and the basic organizing unit of society. It can be identified as an extant architecture but also as an *ideal*, which was rarely precisely implemented nor fully available to less well-off citizens. This idealization is instructive as it points towards the rules that would later guide the development of Western domestic ecologies.

The *oikos* carried wider meanings that variably incorporated the house, home, family, and domestic property, and also applied more specifically to the hearth and cooking space within the dwelling. But the *oikos* was also a multispecies space: the domestic property encompassed chattel animals and animals kept both as pets and for show. Large noble dogs are mentioned by Homer, but the most common canine house companion in ancient Greece was a small white long-coated Maltese dog. Domesticated and tamed birds like starlings, magpies, ravens, and crows, were also popular as they could be trained to talk.¹⁵ Similarly, Nightingales and black-birds were kept for their musical song.¹⁶



Plan of the *oikos*. Drawn by the authors. 1. *Prostas* (corridor), 2. *Oikos* (kitchen/ hearth), 3. *Andron* (male-reserved space for entertaining guests, with perimeter couches), 4. Courtyard.

Different creatures were housed outdoors, primarily for entertainment and to impress guests. Affluent households maintained ponds with *muraenas* and bearded mullets, creatures that could be taught to feed directly from their owners' hands.¹⁷ Enclosures for birds and wildlife were quite

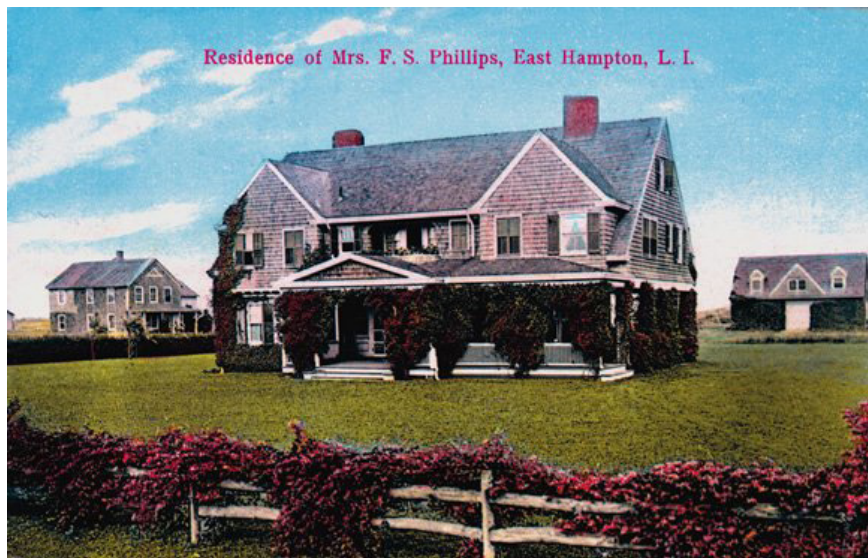
15 Sheila White, "Pets," in *Oxford Classical Dictionary* ed. Simon Hornblower, 1118. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

prevalent; within these, one could, doves, pigeons, peacocks, flamingos, boars, hares, and deer.

In this multispecies oikos, distinct boundaries and demarcations of privacy and property operated between classes and genders as well as other animals and resources. Thus, the house functioned as a distributive device, managing contact between its living inhabitants, and reinforcing the integrity of the family's property. As Aureli and Giudici have observed, it is in the oikos that we trace the origins of the idea of privacy as a condition of the household, which is not simply to enforce seclusion but also to safeguard an integral economic property bound to a family unit.¹⁸ Here, we can begin to see why the dismantling of parts of the house by the racoons at Grey Gardens was so confounding: it threatens the not only the economic dimensions of the architecture, but also the idealized security of the home as a space where a single human family is the only permitted spatial agent.



Grey Gardens and carriage house, in 1915. Image: Sotheby's International Realty.

However, we would extend this observation further, to note that of equal importance is the altered relation to the exterior. The conception of a private, self-sufficient unit internalizes care for the environment, which is now bounded and directed within the domestic sphere. The implication is that the requirement to care for one's wider supportive ecology is significantly constrained, excluding more unruly, complex, and unpredictable systems beyond the domestic boundary. The boundaries of the home act to define ecosystems centered on the human family, within which inter- and intra-species¹⁹ relations could be controlled without reference to the external planetary ecology.

It is exactly through this domestic seclusion that we can see the roots of a distinctly modern domestic relationship to a wider, more-than-human, world: one where seclusion has proliferated between specialized fields of knowledge and distinct spheres of activity. The often mutually incompatible nature of modern practices are permitted to co-exist by the artificial boundaries of the spaces in which they occur: laboratories, fac-

¹⁸ Pier Vittorio Aureli and Maria Shéhérazade Giudici, "Familiar Horror: Toward a Critique of Domestic Space," in *Log*, No. 38 (2016), 105–29.

¹⁹ Inter meaning between species and Intra meaning within a species.

tories, farms, parks, nature reserves, ‘human’ homes.²⁰ The onset of industrialized capitalism would expose the failures of these boundaries to devastating effect, through the multiplying effects of unaccounted-for ‘externalities’:²¹ soil fertility, climate disruption, ozone depletion, pollution, biodiversity loss, species extinctions.²²

In Classical Greek society this radical possibility for autonomy was still somewhat constrained by the Stoic ethics of *oikeiôsis*, roughly translated as self-care, or care towards one’s household,²³ in which we observe a knowledge of one’s connection and place in the fabric of society. Through this notion, links that tie members of one’s family are expanded outwards from the domestic sphere to wider communities, statehood, and even the entire inhabited world – the *oikoumenê*.²⁴ It was this relationality that led Haeckel to the term, *oikologie*, describing the relationships of an organism with its environment, laying the foundations for the early ecological sciences which foregrounded the interactions of an organism’s self-interest with their surrounding natural world. As Verity Platt notes,

The anthropocentric (and anthropomorphizing) impulses of this position admit no need to apologize for a focus on the well-being of mankind, whose superior rationality (*ratio*) grants him authority over other species. Yet at the same time, doctrine of *oikeiôsis* allows for the recognition that each and every living creature, whether human or nonhuman, begins from a similar position of self-concern—one to which *oikeiôsis* in its expanded sense must attend.^{25, 26}

This reveals the many ontologies at work which would shape Haeckel’s early understanding of ecology, and its etymological sibling, *economy*. These frameworks both operate through highly centered ‘self-care’ or ‘self-interest,’ in which practices of care for the natural world are hierarchical, enacted by the human or other-than-human individual. This, importantly, appears in contrast to pre-agrarian and non-Western conceptions as well as post-humanist understandings, which foreground how care for environment is de-centered across multiple more-than-human actors in a constantly negotiated, shared territory.²⁷

At the same time, the gendered and hierarchical arrangement of the *oikos* meant that care for the wider *oikoumenê* was both highly centered and largely operational through the socially enabled male citizen, whose ability to negotiate the wider world would become radically unencum-

- 20 See the work of postmodern theorists such as Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: The Athlone Press, 2000); or Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). Each identify the setting of conceptual boundaries, scopes and seclusions in Modern/Western ontology as factors contributing to the anthropogenic environmental breakdowns associated with modernity and industrialization.
- 21 An externality is a positive or negative outcome of a given economic activity that affects a third party that is not regarded as directly related to that activity. In the case of pollution—a traditional example of a negative externality—a polluter makes decisions based only on the direct cost of and profit opportunity from production and does not consider the indirect costs to those harmed by the pollution. While a chemical works might be a typical case, this framework, we would argue, is fundamental to the ‘private’ activities and considerations within the home, in which rubbish dumps, manufacturing sites, and carbon emissions represent some of the externalities of homemaking.
- 22 For a popular critique, which proposes bringing ‘external’ planetary and ecological limitations into core economic models see Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics* (London: Random House, 2017).
- 23 Daniel Richter, *Cosmopolis: Imagining Community in Late Classical Athens and the Early Roman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 74.
- 24 Verity Platt, “Ecology, Ethics and Aesthetics in Pliny the Elder’s Natural History,” in *Journal of the Clark Art Institute* 17 (2016): 219–42.
- 25 Anthropocentric—human centric—worldviews place the value and importance of human life above those of other species. Philosophically, this is associated with Western humanist discourse advanced by Descartes and others, which attested that humans are alone deemed to have intrinsic value over mechanical nature.
- 26 Platt, “Ecology, Ethics and Aesthetics,” 222.
- 27 ‘Assemblage’ thinking is key to these understandings. This ascribes social and material exteriorities greater agency in ‘human’ actions than in classical Western theory, which prescribes the capacity to act much more exclusively to the individual. See “Actor-Network Theory,” in Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the social: an introduction to actor-network theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); or Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s self-organizing systems in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). For a further extension of this thinking into the ethics of more-than-human care, see Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); or Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More-than-Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

bered by the reciprocal more-than-human relationships of the home. Consequently, care for ‘home economics’ and care for global ecosystems become increasingly distinct, gendered, and often oppositional practices, and the roles of women or more-than-human actors in the maintenance of our shared world are denied.

The Edies experience these paternalistic dimensions at Grey Gardens. The right to domestic seclusion was removed from the two women, through the “raids”²⁸ of sanitarians, detectives, and others. Instead, their privacy proved contingent on the Edies maintaining their domestic property to preserve the existing ecological order. Their forms of dwelling proposed an alternative conception of their more-than-human community, with implications that were wider than their home itself: they were transgressions against the social, ecological, and economic project represented by the ‘well-maintained’ New England villa.

AUTONOMY: THE VILLA

The architectural and urban characteristics of Grey Gardens, from its suburban seclusion to its colonial New England style timber pediment, sit within the longer lineage of the colonial villa typology. From the Roman Republic to the suburban McMansion, villas were devised as satellite projects to urbanity. They were made to be exported: at once upholding the myth of the arcadian landscape, where nature is tamed and idealized by Man, and defining the act of dwelling as a mark of colonization on the land.²⁹ Established in remote territories without large urban centers, they reinforced the ideas of self-sufficiency and ecological domination. In these locations, the archetype of the house as a “distributive machine”³⁰ became critical to colonial strategies which heavily relied on ecological transformation and extraction.

The most architecturally influential iteration of the type are Palladio’s villas in the Veneto region. Never simply a country retreat, the Palladian villa was at its root an architectural instrument for organizing ecological territories. His clients were the newly landed Venetian gentry, leading the geopolitical shift in the maritime economy of the Venetian state towards terra firma and trading routes to the west. In this context, the villas were conceived as a key strategic infrastructure in a geopolitical push into the Italian mainland and directed the ecological project of transforming what had been a marshland into a productive territory. This is a project that itself had precedent in the Roman Latifundia and the associated extraordinary landscape transformations wrought on the Mediterranean over the Roman period. Palladio’s patrons, as Manfredo Tafuri noted, were above all interested in “an active operation of intensive and rational exploitation of their landed property.”³¹

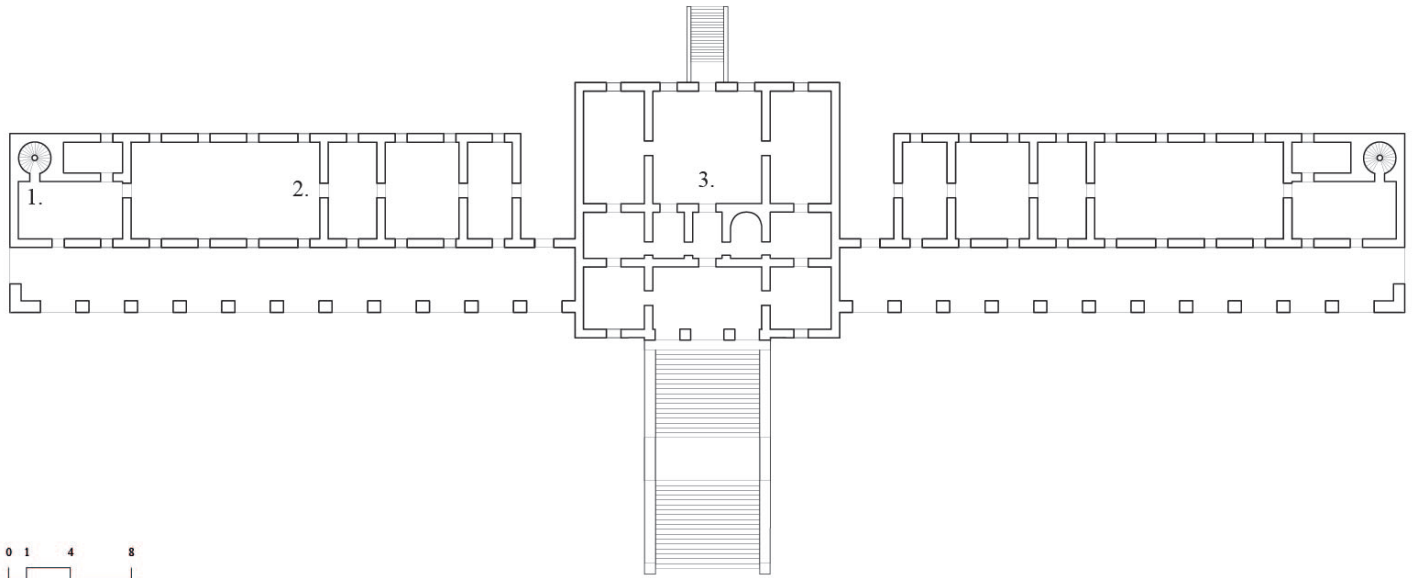
These productive, agricultural aspects of the villa have been overlooked, because of the work of leading scholars such as Rudolf Wittkower and Colin Rowe, focusing on proportional arguments and theorizing on the sole domestic part of the plan. Yet these dimensions are an integral part of the architecture and proof that Palladio was working through a new agricultural typology, whose purpose was to direct and harness human and more-than-human labor in the service of a colonial project.

28 Little Edie’s description, extracted from the previously quoted opening scene of, *Grey Gardens*, directed by Albert and David Maysles (Chicago: Home Vision Entertainment, 1975).

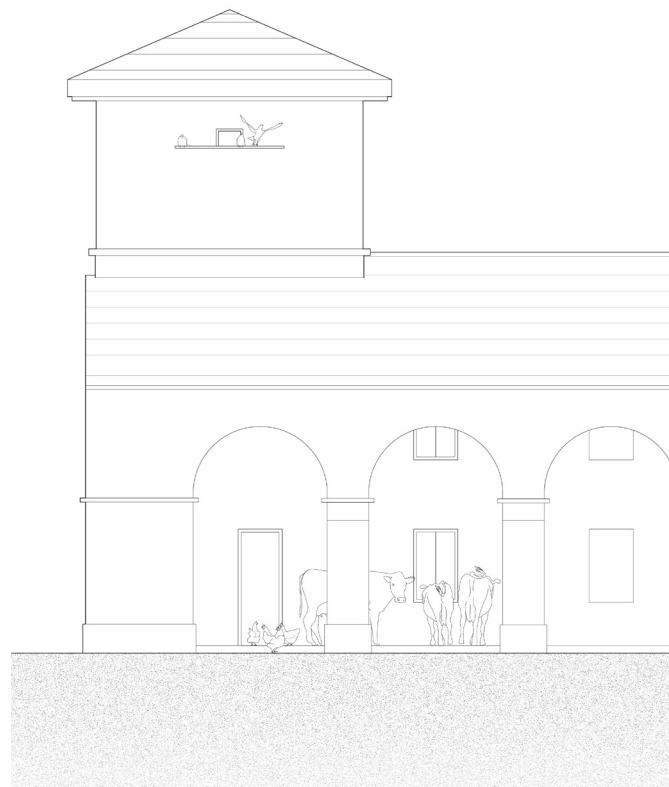
29 See James S. Ackerman, *The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 35-61.

30 Pier Vittorio Aureli and Maria Shéhérazade Giudici, “Familiar Horror: Toward a Critique of Domestic Space,” in *Log*, No. 38 (2016), 109.

31 Manfredo Tafuri, “Committenza e tipologia nelle ville palladiane,” in *Bollettino CISA*, No. XI (1969): 120-121. [un’operazione attiva di sfruttamento intensivo e razionale dei propri possedimenti agricoli] translated from Italian by the authors.



Villa Emo, Andrea Palladio, Veneto, 1556-59. Drawn by the authors. 1. *Dovecote* (house for pigeons), 2. Working agricultural sheds, 3. *Villa*.



Enlargement of the *Dovecote* (house for pigeons). *Villa Emo*, Andrea Palladio, Veneto, 1556-59. Drawn by the authors.

In the case of villa Emo, one of the few projects built according to his published drawings, Palladio writes:

The wine cellars, the granaries, the animal sheds and the other rural buildings are to be found on each side of the lord's house, at each end one finds a dovecote which is of good use to the owner and is an embellishment to the place.

32

Villa Emo's plan makes the structures of power at play even more visible. The highly composed axiality of the complex extends from north to south across the estate, aligning itself with a pre-existing Roman grid. The villa's living quarters occupy the center of the complex and are raised off the ground, directing the master's gaze outwards over the landscape. The center of the house is no longer a courtyard or a hearth; all the rooms face outwards towards the territory of the estate. Two symmetrical, elongated colonnaded wings flank the house on either side. As Palladio tells us, these are designed to accommodate various agricultural functions. The barchesse, as they are called in the Veneto, contribute to the working nature of the villa, akin to designs seen in Villa Badoer and other works by Palladio. Each wing, in the Villa Emo, concludes with imposing tower-like dovecotes, providing nesting spaces for domesticated pigeons.

It is no surprise that Palladio's typological innovation, which involved connecting a stately primary residence with ancillary farm structures into a symmetrical and cohesive composition, became a model for organizing plantations in the New World. In colonized territories, the Palladian-style villas served as a tool through which a privileged class, over the centuries, leveraged the labor of the working class, the enslaved, and other-than-humans into a project of landscape transformation to maximize extraction of resources.³³ For example, by the mid-1670s, Barbados had been transformed by British colonialists from an indigenous biodiverse mixed forest to an open landscape almost entirely covered with sugarcane plantations.³⁴ Each plantation featured its stately house which dominated the landscape and the bodies at work within it. Architecturally, these colonial estates may appear as a simple formal pastiche of Palladian principles. However, in social, ecological, and functional terms, they remained entirely aligned with the villa's original purpose — serving as a powerful architectural tool for organizing territories, ecologies, and more-than-human bodies in the service of a dominant homo oeconomicus.³⁵

SEPARATION

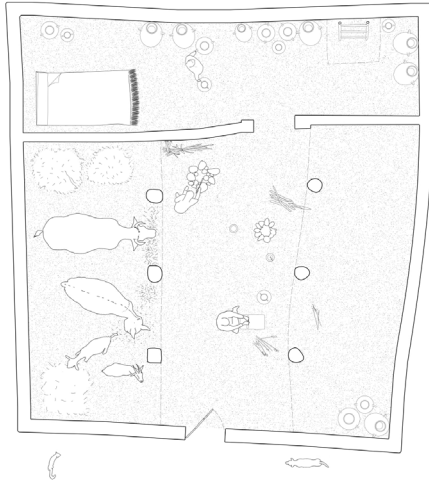
Palladio's Venetian villas have been variously subject to alterations and transformations to the present day, with the majority of these resulting in the removal of the agricultural wings either architecturally or functionally. These developments reflect the gradual separation of productive more-than-human ecologies from the domestic idyll. The removal of more-than-human ecologies from the domestic environment over the modern period is linked to the major biopolitical developments of the era. These can be summarized as the increasing centralization and industrialization of agriculture, the displacement of subsistence peasantry to an urban working

32 Andrea Palladio, *I quattro libri dell'architettura*, 1570. Translated by the authors.

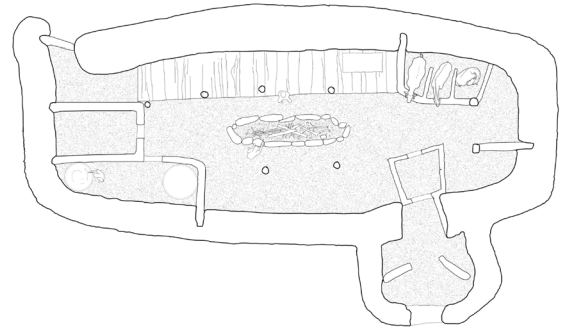
33 James Ackerman, "The Villa as Paradigm," in *Perspecta*, Vol. 22 (1986): 15.

34 Eve Walsh Stoddard, *Positioning Gender and Race in (post)colonial Plantation Space: Connecting Ireland and the Caribbean* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 33-34.

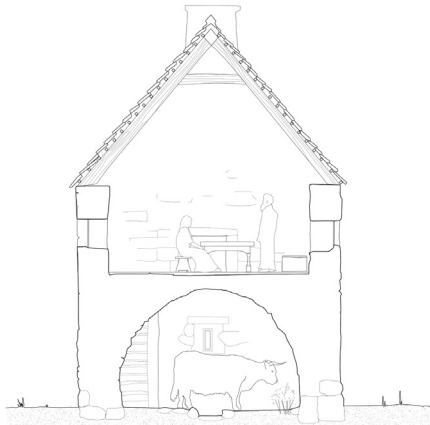
35 Homo oeconomicus, whose etymological roots also lie in the oikos, is the portrayal of humans as agents who are consistently rational and narrowly self-interested. See Joseph Persky, "Retrospectives: The Ethology of Homo economicus," in *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring, 1995): 221-231.



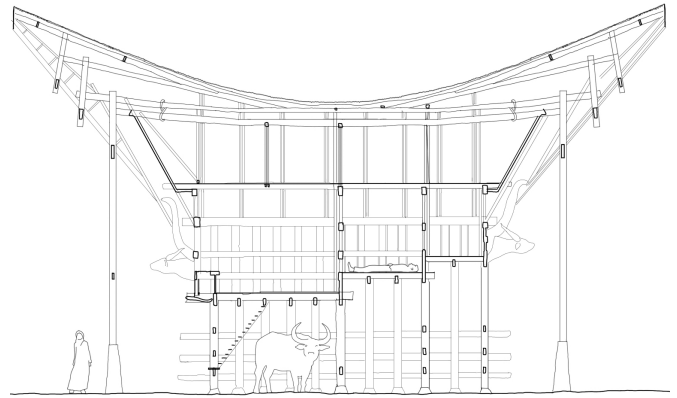
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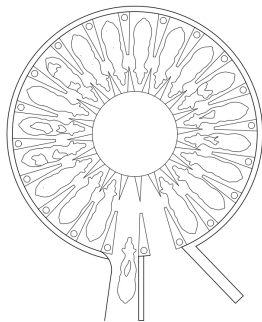
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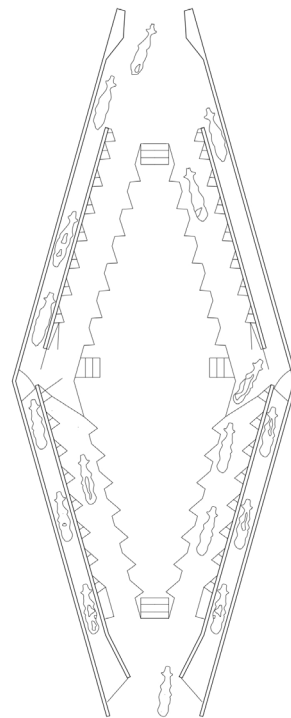
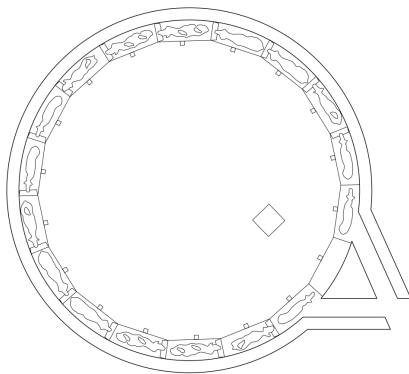
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1. Four Room house, an Israelite domestic typology, 1100 – 600 BCE. 2. Adalstraethi longhouse, Reykjavik, Iceland, twelfth century CE. 3. Glenochar Bastle House, Scottish Border, sixteenth century CE. 4. Typical section of a modern Tongkonan, Sulawesi, Indonesia. 5. and 6. Feedlots in an industrial cattle farm, American Midwest, mid-twentieth century.

class, and the development of modern antibiotic public health regimes.³⁶

These comparative drawings of farmhouses present snapshots of the shifting relationships between human and farm animal cohabitation found in many parts of the world. In the longhouse typology, humans, cattle, horses, and commensals shelter together under one roof, sustaining a microclimate of shared heat during harsh winter seasons. In the Bastle House in Britain, or the Tongkonan in Indonesia, cattle are kept in the spaces below the human dwellings for their security and protection from the climate. However, with the advent of industrialization, animals were increasingly rendered as metabolic machines and moved out of domestic view.

The radical intensification of agriculture, linked to soil fertility crises, climatic disruption, threatened food security, and species extermination, is, in this sense, connected to the eventual complete removal of more-than-human productive ecologies from the caring practices of ‘homemaking.’

RECONCEPTION: PLUMWOOD MOUNTAIN

By the 1970s, the acceleration of environmental destruction and the growing disconnect between humans and nature had already caused concern across the world. Amongst contemporary thinkers were those, led most prominently by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess of the deep ecology movement,³⁷ who attributed climate change and biodiversity loss not solely to technological or political failures, but to fundamental relationships towards the natural world ingrained within Western ontologies.

Among these dispersed thinkers were a cohort of philosophers in Australia, including Val Plumwood and her partner Richard Sylvan. Plumwood stands out as one of the first thinkers to truly connect environmental concerns with theories of social liberation, linking the attitudes of the global north towards other living beings with the structural oppressions of gender, race, and class. She identified a form of “human chauvinism,”³⁸ or anthropocentrism, whose categorical assumption asserts that ‘man’ is exclusively capable of rational and moral thought. This fundamentally places him as a superior subject, endowed with agency over everything that is part of a non-sentient nature. In Plumwood’s view, this included, by extension, women, the working class, the colonized, the Indigenous, and the other-than-human world.³⁹ According to this worldview, beings are only deemed valuable insofar as they serve the utility of the central human subject of concern.

Plumwood called for new ways of understanding our position in this world, by restoring intelligence, agency and even morality to non-human beings, re-situating the human within the wider ecologies which they necessarily co-constitute.⁴⁰ She would do this in ways that were profoundly influenced by her Australian context, learning greatly from the situated knowledges, ethics, and ontologies of indigenous peoples to whom the wakefulness of non-human beings is self-evident.⁴¹

36 Biopolitics, as conceived by Michel Foucault, refers to the particular characteristics of modern governance as a political rationality, concerned with the management and control of life and populations: “to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order.” Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, trans. R. Hurley (1998): 138.

37 Deep ecology is an environmental philosophy and social movement—sometimes referred to as an “ecosophy”—centered on the conviction that humans need to undergo a profound and ontological transformation in their relationship with nature, introduced by Arne Naess and George Sessions. See Bill Devall, “The Deep Ecology Movement,” in *Natural Resources Journal* 20, No. 2 (1980): 299–322.

38 See Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

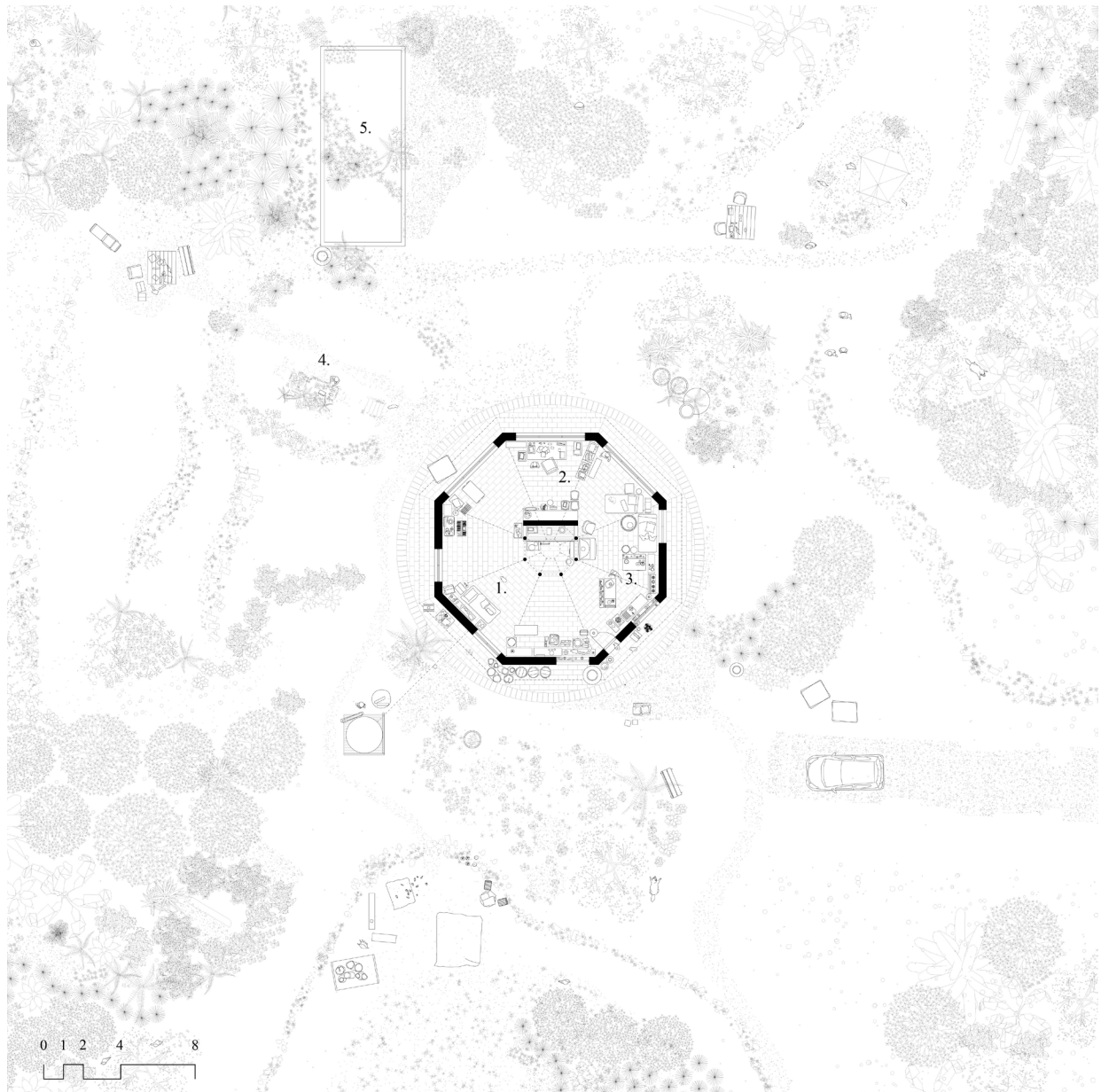
39 Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 12.

40 “co-constituting” in the context of environmental philosophy and ecology implies the interconnectedness and interdependence of elements within an ecosystem. In an ecological sense, “co-constituting” refers to the collaborative and mutually influential relationships among various components of the environment, such as living organisms, their habitats, and the physical elements of the ecosystem.

41 Deborah Bird Rose, “Val Plumwood’s Philosophical Animism,” in *Environmental Humanities*, Vol. 3 (2013), 93–109.



Plumwood Mountain. Image courtesy of the Plumwood Mountain Foundation.



Plan of Plumwood Mountain house and surrounding site. Drawn by the authors. 1. Bed, 2. Writing desk, 3. Kitchen, 4. Shrine to Victor and Birubi, 5. Pond.

Plumwood's philosophy is richly informed by many direct encounters with non-human animals. Most profoundly, her near-death experience at the jaws of a crocodile while kayaking in the Northern Territories in 1985 would lead her to reflect on her states of denial and horror at humans being "food for others."⁴² Her philosophy was, therefore, a field philosophy, lived out and interrogated through her interactions with other beings. Furthermore, actualizing these philosophies meant living amidst them, and she would go further than most in her efforts to re-imagine a domestic architecture that embodied and tested out the ecological philosophies that she espoused.

In the 1970s, together with Sylvan, she undertook the construction of a stone dwelling, known as Plumwood Mountain, in a rainforest south-east of Canberra. Plumwood's starting point for the house, perhaps surprisingly, was the typology of the monastic chapter house, traditionally a communal space within cathedrals, monasteries, and collegiate churches for religious communities to gather. Plumwood re-imagined this typology to support the coming and going of environmental activists, particularly those resisting the logging of forests covering the mountain, as well as the multiple species inhabiting the area—from antechinuses to goannas and waratahs to wombats. Plumwood especially drew inspiration from the English chapter house, typically circular or octagonal, with a vaulted roof supported by a single central column, as seen at Wells Cathedral. Here, however, she inverted the inward-looking character of the chapter house, incorporating generous windows in the outer walls.



Shrines to wombats Victor and Birubi within the garden. Photograph by the authors.

In comparison to our prior investigations, the chapter house, as a domestic typology, introduced a non-hierarchical character to the space, devoid of inner private sanctums. This was consistent with Plumwood's critique of Western societies, which she considered to be obsessed with property, where the individual self is conflated with a 'singular,' unique, and exclusive dwelling place. For Plumwood, this insistence on honoring one 'official' place, such as where one is raised or permanently settled, overlooks the numerous places that provide material and ecological support—what she termed "shadow places."⁴³ Her perspective contrasts with the contemporaneous experiments of architects Brenda and Robert Vale, who advocated for the creation of off-the-grid 'autonomous' homes. Instead, Plum-

42 Val Plumwood and Lorraine Shannon, "Meeting the Predator," in *The Eye of the Crocodile*, ed. Val Plumwood (Canberra: ANU Press, 2012), 9-21.

43 "[S]hadow places that provide our material and ecological support, most of which, in a global market, are likely to elude our knowledge and responsibility. This is not an ecological form of consciousness." Val Plumwood, "Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling," in *Ecological Humanities*, Issue 44 (March 2008).

wood argued for “[T]he recognition of the multiple, complex network of places that supports our lives.”⁴⁴

While the symmetrical form and privileged views, would at first appear to evoke a tradition of the idealized villa, reminiscent of Palladio’s La Rotunda, Plumwood’s approach to architectural boundaries challenges the directionality of this view and de-centered the human. Most famously, Val Plumwood shared this space with two wombats, Victor and Birubi, and evidence of her companions can be found throughout the house and garden. For example, to prevent the powerful Birubi from splintering the timber front door with his claws, she installed a metal plate to cover the lower half. Visitors can find large wombat burrows and small wombat sculptures surrounding the house, amidst hundreds of rare waratah flowers, platforms for lyrebirds, and benches frequented by large goanans. These are artefacts of the ways Plumwood seamlessly intertwined the ‘thinking’ that emerged from her conceptualizations with tangible acts of ‘building’ and ‘dwelling,’ self-building with materials sourced from the site, while simultaneously writing some of the seminal articles that went on to influence the trajectories of environmental philosophy.⁴⁵

FORMS OF COHABITATION

Val Plumwood’s eco-feminist experimentations with form and cohabitation at Plumwood Mountain, and the Edies’ conceptual and physical dismantling of anthropocentric, chauvinist domesticities, illustrate two snapshots of alternative attitudes to the more-than-human in domestic space. What do they suggest about doing architecture in an era of ecological unravelling?

Both houses accept their typological heritage matter-of-factly. Rather, it is the unexpected content of the home that causes either a social disruption, in the case of Grey Gardens, or a philosophical challenge, in the case of Plumwood Mountain. The hospitality shown by the Edies towards the host of creatures accommodated in their attic raises questions about how the interstitial and ancillary spaces in our homes can be ‘softened’ to allow nature to encroach: offering of some of the attic, roof or wall build-up to neighboring wildlife is most representative of a generosity which is already starting to be formally integrated into modern homes. However, architecture concerned with the creation of new environmental containers, without challenging what makes for an appropriate inhabitant, misses an opportunity to practice inter-species care. Instead, working between physical interventions and ethical practices, these homemakers attempted to bridge the ancient Western conceptual and architectural schisms between ecosystem management and homemaking.

In the years following these experiments, new paradigms offered by ‘big picture’ ecological movements—such as rewilding, de- and post-growth, decolonization—have expanded ecological sciences into other disciplinary territories. In parallel, queer ecologists and family abolitionists recount how the bourgeois family home, itself an invention of industrial modernity, comes to be occupied by the genealogical symmetry of father/mother and daughter/son, where animals belong only as accessories to this normative unit of social reproduction. These developments continue to offer fertile ground for new practices which re-conceive architecture in post-humanist terms, where domestic space is recognized as co-constituted of multispecies beings, human and other-than-human. A collective re-reading of animals in domestic space might help to build on the momentum of these movements.

44 Ibid.

45 See Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971).

AUTHOR

Feral Partnerships is an architectural design and research collective founded by Beth Fisher Levine, Enrico Brondelli di Brondello, James Peplow Powell & Matthew Darmour-Paul. Working through design interventions, research, curation, teaching, and public engagements, the collective aims to inspire new possibilities for building worlds with the more-than-human in mind.