What If Hestia Left the Fire? Shared Spaces and Care in the *Habitat Groupé*

Marta Malinverni

Photo of the children's community of the Abreuvoir project in the shared garden, 1974, Bruxelles
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In her feminist science-fiction book *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Marge Pierce imagines a society in which "childcare is shared by all members of society." Because childcare has traditionally been central to domestic life, distributing it beyond the family transforms the private into the public: care[1] becomes political, and domestic labor assumes a revolutionary significance. In this framework, the concepts of family, space, and community are re-signified, as everyday acts of nurturing acquire social and collective weight. This vision finds empirical resonance in the practices of l'Abreuvoir, a cohousing project established in Belgium during the 1970s. Residents explicitly articulated this ethos: in an interview from the period, one participant explained that:

> If you came to live here, you would see your child become attached for a while to a man completely different from your husband, then to another, and so on, until the moment when he would make his own choices and find his own balance. With us, in order to grow, children are not obliged to copy their parents nor to structure themselves against them.[2]

L'Abreuvoir was one instance of the *habitat groupé* typology that spread across Belgium, France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands between the 1970s and 1980s.[3] In Belgium, these were the first attempts at an alter-

1 Care is here understood as a politicized form of reproductive labor, rather than as an ethical or humanitarian concern. Its spatialization within the *habitat groupé* constitutes a direct challenge to the bourgeois separation between private life and political action, transforming domestic space into an arena of collective organization and autonomy.

2 Helia Jenard, "On sait bien ce qu'ils font la-dedans," Journal, *Hebdo 75* 9 (18.12.1975 1975)., translated from French: *"Si tu venais vivre ici, tu verrais ton fils s'attacher à un homme tout à fait différent de ton mari pendant quelque temps, puis à un autre, et ainsi de suite, jusqu'au moment où il ferait ses choix et atteindrait son propre équilibre. Chez nous, pour grandir, les gosses ne sont pas obligés de copier leurs parents ou de se structurer contre eux."*

3 Jean-François Mabardi. Dan Bernfeld, *L'habitat groupé autogeré au Benelux et en Europe* (Louvain-la-neuve: Fondation Roi Baudouin, 1984); Patrick Jouret Inès de Biolley, *L'habitat Groupé: une alternative?* (Louvain-La-Neuve: Fondation Roi Baudouin, 1981).

native form of collective living. They opposed bourgeois domesticity and imagined new forms of everyday relational space, transforming the domestic sphere into a tool for collective autonomy and experimentation. In contemporary international discourse, the *habitat groupé* falls under what is commonly called *cohousing*, an umbrella term that encompasses different forms of collaborative living.[4] Here, however, the term *habitat groupé* is preferred, as it emphasizes the historical, political, and cultural specificity of Belgian collective housing in the 1970s and 1980s. These projects were shaped by self-organized practices, a strong ideological commitment to everyday life, and a militant heritage rooted in leftist political movements and experiments in collective living.[5] While they share overarching principles, Belgian *habitats groupés* vary widely in the intensity of their social experimentation: some adopt modest forms of shared living, while others pursue fully integrated cohabitation. The number of residents, the composition of families, and the collective lifestyle vary significantly from one case to another, resulting in unique spatial and social configurations.

To understand the innovative nature of Belgian habitats groupés, it is necessary to situate them within the societal and cultural climate in which they emerged.[6] The 1970s and 1980s in Belgium were marked by political ferment intertwined with social tensions, the coal crisis, and the search for new forms of cohabitation. These were years in which the certainties of industrial modernity cracked, opening fissures through which collective desires for transformation emerged. Post-'68 Belgium was not just protest of the factories and union organizing: it also included occupied houses, feminist assemblies, self-published magazines, and alternative pedagogies. The entire country, and Brussels in particular, experienced an urban acceleration that fragmented the territory and reinforced the separation between public and private, between center and periphery, and between productive and reproductive labor.

In 1970s Belgium, feminist critique emerged in a context where the nuclear family continued to play a central role in social reproduction in the absence of a strong public welfare system. The resistance thus did not remain merely symbolic but directly engaged with the material organization of daily life, rendering the home a political object.[7] Here, tensions between waged work, motherhood, economic dependence, and emancipation concentrated, and it is from this point that many women began to question not only roles but the very structures of family life. At a time marked by the unraveling of social protection, fragility of care infrastructures, and the growth of bourgeois individualism, some people responded not with resignation, but with invention.

Small groups of private individuals, without any preexisting institutional framework, autonomously and voluntarily began to imagine alternative ways of living to those made available by the real estate market and the familialist model of the time. This gave rise to the first habitat groupé projects. They were not architectural utopias conceived in abstraction but immediate, pragmatic responses to both material constraints and symbolic frustrations: "We no longer wanted to live like our parents."[8] In this context, the home ceased to function solely as an individual refuge and was reconfigured as a site of political and social experimentation.

4 Sfriso Simone Edoardo Narne, *L'abitare condiviso, Le residenze collettive dalle origini al cohousing* (Venezia: Marsilio editore, 2013).

5 Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (MIT Press, 1981). https://books.google.be/books?id=AQRjNcrk1hsC; Carlotta Cossutta, "Cambiare la casa, trasformare la societa'," in *Domesticita'. Lo spazio politico della casa nelle pensatrici statunitensi del XIX secolo*, ed. Edizioni ETS (POLIS 8, 2023).

6 Monique Dumont and Elisabeth Franken, "et si la ville était à nous…aussi…," *Les CAHIERS du GRIF* 19 (1977), edit. Marie-Thérèse CIVELLIEZ-Bruxelles.

7 Frauenkollektiv RitClique (Hg), „Vater, Mutter, kind -wir und die Kleinfamilie," in *Zündende Funken, Wiener Feministinnen der 70er jahre*, ed. Frauenkollektiv RitClique (Hg) (Budapest: Erhard Löcher, 2018).

8 The testimonies cited derive from a corpus of semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted between 2022 and 2025 with founding inhabitants, former residents, and current residents of Belgian habitat groupé projects (l'Abreuvoir, Sart Saint Nicolas, Les Arbrelles, and La Placette), selected as case studies within the framework of this research. This study forms part of a doctoral research project supervised by Gérald Ledent and previously supervised by Audrey Courbebaisse.

An important aspect of the habitat groupé was that their inhabitants conceived of them as *habitats* rather than simply dwellings or residences.[9] It is important to note that the term *habitat groupé* was adopted in European urbanistic and sociological debates from the 1960s–70s to describe alternative forms of cohabitation, characterized by shared management of daily life and common spaces designed to support conscious social ties. In Belgium, the earliest discussions appeared in French during this period, where scholars such as Jean-François Mabardi and Dan Bernfeld, alongside architects, urbanists, and sociologists, employed the term to designate residential collectives that arose spontaneously outside established institutional or market circuits.[10] In this sense, an habitat groupé is not simply a collection of housing units but a form of micro-political architecture: a spatial and social apparatus through which the domestic sphere is reconfigured and relations among residents—who are not necessarily connected by family ties—are actively produced and mediated. The resulting social bonds extend beyond conventional neighborly relations, embodying a deliberate engagement with collective life and shared responsibility.

Private units coexist with areas intended for communal use, which may include shared kitchens, laundries, gardens, workspaces, or even external areas outside the main structure, whose variability is a constitutive part of the model. Unlike traditional housing, founded on the closed self-sufficiency of the nuclear family, the habitat groupé is based on a collective life project that encourages interdependence and the sharing of resources, responsibilities, and skills. Certain elements recur: a common kitchen–living room (the pulsating heart of collective life), a shared garden or courtyard (which visually and symbolically connects the housing units), and sometimes a guest room for people in transitional situations.[11]

This research is based on a combined methodological approach that brings together architectural analysis and qualitative interviews. By reading plans layouts alongside residents' accounts—both from archival sources and contemporary interviews—it becomes possible to register not only the spatial organization of the habitat groupé but also the social practices, forms of care, and power relations that these spaces enabled or constrained.

To illustrate this spectrum of practices, in the following notes I will visit four projects, arguing that the habitat groupé is not a rigid model, but a living laboratory in which the form of architecture adapts to collective dynamics and the life vision of its inhabitants. The first, l'Abreuvoir, designed by architect Marc Wolff and conceived together with his wife Françoise Wolff, is a pioneering project in Belgium (1973) and is characterized by a particularly dense degree of experimentation. The second, Sart Saint Nicolas (1975), by Paul Petit, follows a different approach, modulating the sharing of spaces and responsibilities. The third, les Arbrelles (1984), and the fourth, la Placette (1986), both developed by architect Thierry Lamy, each have their own configuration of private and communal spaces, reflecting specific choices of social and residential organization. Across these cases, the architect operates not as a solitary author but within an explicitly participatory framework, engaging directly with future residents and translating their everyday needs and collective aspirations into the spatial design of the project.

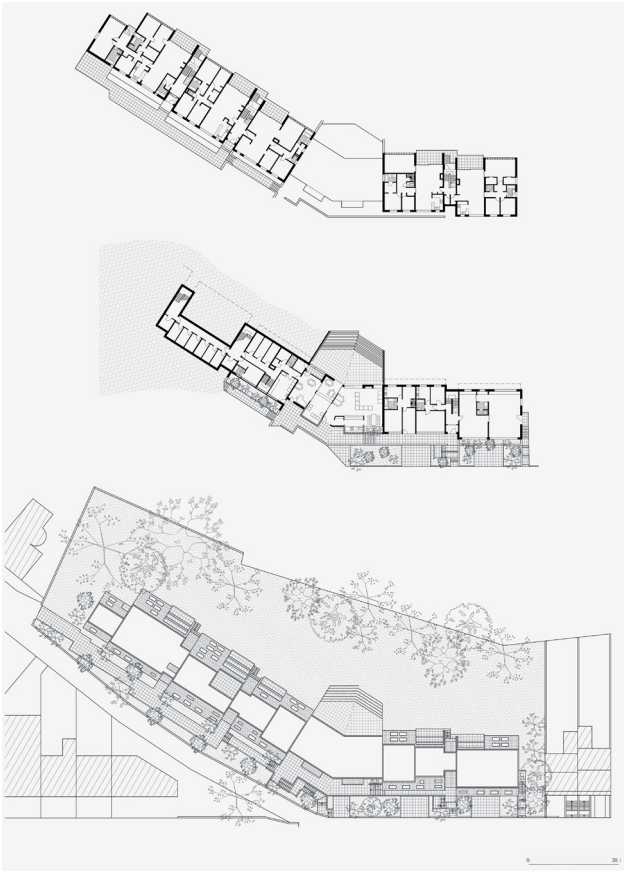
9 Marie-Geneviève Dezès et al., *L'habitat pavillonaire*, 2001 ed., Habitat et Sociétés, (l'Harmattan, 2001). The term *habitat* refers to a complex living environment, an ecosystem of material, social, and symbolic relations, in which space is not a neutral backdrop but an active condition of existence.

10 Jean-François Mabardi and Dan Bernfeld, *L'habitat groupé autogeré au Benelux et en Europe*.

11 Inès de Biolley, *L'habitat Groupé: une alternative?*

L'ABREUVOIR: REDESTRIBUTION OF DOMESTIC LABOR

The conception of l'Abreuvoir began in 1970 at the initiative of a small group of friends (ten families and four single individuals), including Marc and Françoise Wolff. Driven by the desire to live communally, with limited economic resources, and the need to live in the city (Watermael-Boitsfort, Brussels), the residents envisioned the space as the concrete translation of a shared life project in which services, time, and responsibilities were collectively organized. The arrangement of the childcare for the sixteen children present at the time was not an addition, but a structural pillar of the community system, made necessary by the fact that all the adults were working.[12] L'Abreuvoir, therefore, responded not only to a housing need but enacted a true change of life, founded on shared commitments and collective decision-making processes.



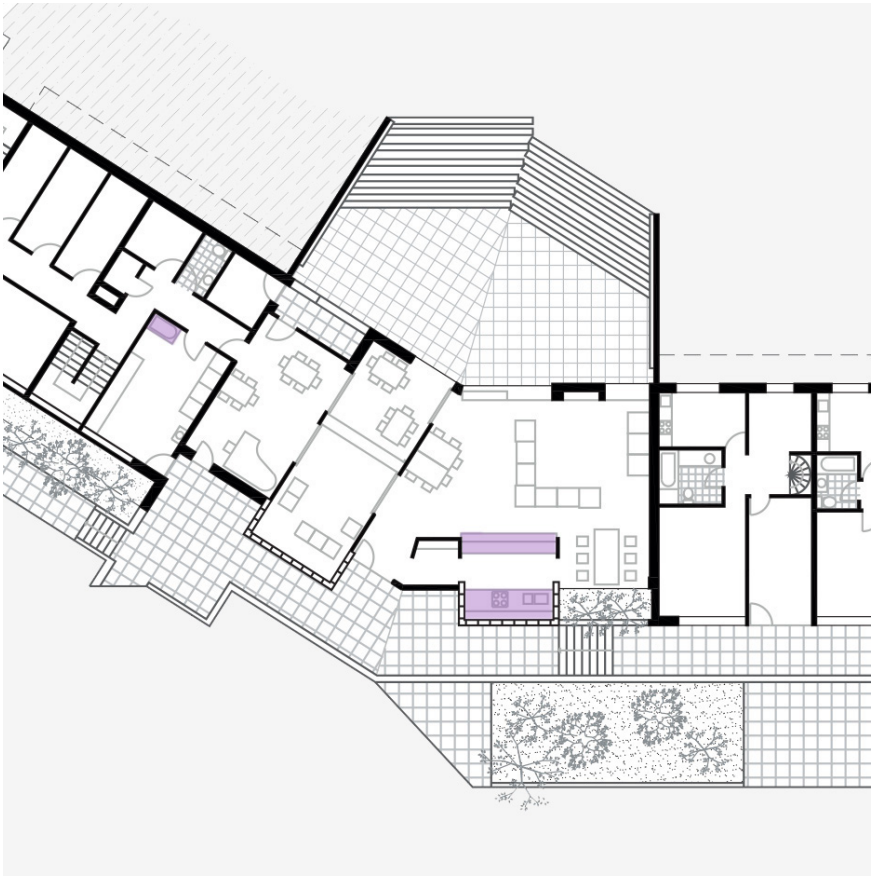
Plans of Abreuvoir project. Original drawing by Marc Wolff, 1973, Bruxelles.
Drawing by Souleymen Melloul, 2026 © Marc Wolff.

L'Abreuvoir clearly shows how reproductive labor—what Silvia Federici and Leopoldina Fortunati consider the pillar of capitalist society—was not simply redistributed, but profoundly reconfigured.[13] Every spatial choice makes possible a different distribution of care: no longer the individual condemnation of the housewife-mother, but a shared act, organized according to shifts, negotiated. In the space for living, the *living commun*—so named by agreement among the inhabitants to this day—

12 Marc Wolff, "L'Abreuvoir, ensemble d'habitations groupées," *Revue A+*, no. 6 (mars 1974).

13 Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the world: Feminism anfd the Politics of the Commons*, ed. Andrej Grubačić, Kairos, (Oakland: PM press, 2019); Silvia Federici, *Caliban et la Sorcière: Femmes, corps et accumulation primitive*, trans. collectif Senonevero Julie Abbou, revue et complétée par Julien Guazzani, 4th ed. (Entremonde, 2014, 2004). Leopoldina Fortunati, *The arcane of reproduction: House, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, trans. Hilary Creek, ed. Jum Fleming (New York: Autonomedia, 1981).

which is situated centrally, there is a single large kitchen hall that opens onto a living room, where those preparing meals watch the children playing, and it is large enough to accommodate everyone for meals and for collective meetings. Meals were prepared in shifts by couples twice a week, stretching care beyond the schedules of salaried labor. After a few weeks, the residents reorganized the system, noticing that husbands in married couples often contributed little. "So we started mixing the couples, then it really worked," recalled the founding members. This simple adjustment not only distributed domestic work more equitably but also made gendered asymmetries visible and correctable. Care time ceased to reproduce hierarchies and became genuinely shared, removed from the conventional logic of domestic labor.[14]



Magnification of the plan of the Abreuvoir project showing the collective interior spaces. Original drawing by Marc Wolff, 1973, Bruxelles, color highlights by the author, 2025

The children grew up surrounded by many hands, and today, as adults in their 50s and 60s, they remember having a plurality of adult figures besides their own parents. This plurality was not only perceived by the children but was also part of a conscious and shared practice among the adults in the community. "As a child, I had more adult references, not just my parents. I knew that if Mom and Dad weren't around, or if I needed something, I could go to that neighbor or that other family. There was always someone," recalls Eleonore, former resident and children at that time. The residents' voices reflect a childhood nurtured within a network

14 Gérald Ledent and Chloe Salembier, "Co-Housing to Ease and Share Household Chores? Spatial Visibility and Collective Deliberation as Levers for Gender Equality," *Buildings* 11 (04/30 2021), https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings11050189; Gérald Ledent, Chloe Salembier, and Damien Vanneste, *Sustainable Dwelling, Between Spatial Polyvalence and Residents' Empowerment*, ed. Herman Hertzberger (Louvain: PUL presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2019).

of distributed care, where educational and emotional responsibility was not concentrated within the family nucleus but shared across the residential community. As Marc Wolff, the 82-year-old architect of the project and former resident, notes, "If I scolded my daughters and their mother wasn't home, they knew very well that they could go cry to another mother. And they would be comforted." This was part of living together: authority and care were not concentrated in a single person. Donna Haraway invites us to imagine kinship that does not arise from blood but from choice—*"Make Kin, not babies"*—bonds built in alliance, not in genealogy, because the future is not inherited; it is cultivated together.[15] The care network, in the specific case of l'Abreuvoir, found concrete expression not only in the living commun but also in another, more discreet common space, essential for daily routine. Next to the living and reception area, in the functional laundry room, a small bathtub called "*la lave gosses"* by the residents (literally "the kids' wash" in French), was installed to start the evening routine and bathe the children, preparing them for bed before their respective parents returned. A chart for signing up and leaving their baskets with pajamas was also kept in this room. The practices of accompanying children thus became both organizational and symbolic devices of sharing and can be read as feminist micro-geographies.[16] Within these spaces, the furniture itself was chosen to encourage interaction and flexibility: large tables, arranged to be visible from the kitchen (the central space of collective life), were used for communal meals, completing children's homework after school, and organizing afternoon snacks. Large modular cushions were added to the living room, allowing adults to sit on the floor during collective meetings and children to transform the space into a play area. The furniture, modular and strategically positioned, thus became a true device for sociability, visibility, and shared care, capable of simultaneously supporting conviviality, education, and play.

Photo of participatory meeting of the future participants of the Abreuvoir project, 1970, Bruxelles
© Archive Françoise Wolff.

15 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, ed. Michael M. J. Fisher and Joseph Dumit, Experimental futures: Technological lives, scientific arts, anthropological voices, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

16 Joan Rothschild John, *Design and Feminism : re-visioning spaces, places and everyday things*, ed. Alethea Cheng John Rothschild (New Brunswick, New Yersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

As reported in a contemporary article about the l'Abreuvoir project, the issue of dividing domestic labor was explicitly framed as a foundation of communal life: "This problem of task distribution is a fundamental aspect of life in community. Everywhere, it is resolved in the same spirit: no sexism; each person, man or woman, takes turns doing the dishes, shopping, cooking, cleaning, and looking after the children when there are any."[17]

Photo of the building site of the Abreuvoir project, 1973, Bruxelles
© Archive Françoise Wolff.

It was not just about lightening the load, but about politicizing labor and making it visible, renegotiating the threshold between public and private, home and society. The home itself, often thought of as a neutral space, thus revealed itself as a battlefield: redefining who cooks, who cleans, and who cares became a way to rewrite the grammar of power. The collective therefore dismantled the myth of the woman as angel of the hearth: at last, Hestia took her seat at the assembly table.

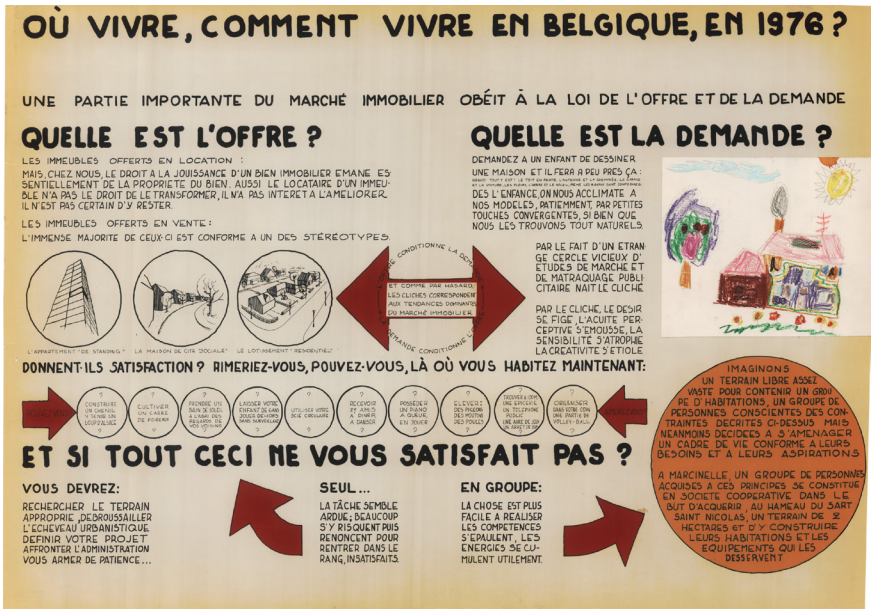
At l'Abreuvoir, domestic and care labor are not merely shared but structurally reorganized through space, routines, and collective agreements, producing a redistribution of responsibility that reshapes everyday life beyond the nuclear family.

SAINT NICOLAS: ESCAPING THE SUBURBAN PLOT

The story of the Sart Saint Nicolas project, developed a few years later by architect Paul Petit together with the future residents (1975) in Marcinelle (Charleroi), originates from a similar impulse but takes shape in a different social context. Here, the promoting group (composed of family units heterogeneous in age, profession, and origin, of which the architect was part only during the first years after construction) progressively structured itself around the idea of creating an environment that fostered mutuality and the sharing of resources. In this case too, the initial motivation

17 Jenard, "On sait bien ce qu'ils font la-dedans." translated from French: "*Ce problème du partage des tâches est un aspect primordial de la vie en communauté. Partout, il est résolu dans le même esprit: pas de sexisme; chacun, homme ou femme, prend à tour de rôle la vaisselle, les courses, la cuisine, le ménage et la garde des enfants lorsqu'il y en a.*

was twofold: on one hand, the difficulty of accessing quality housing at affordable costs; on the other, the desire to escape the isolation of suburban plots, imagining a form of supportive neighborhood. The project took shape through regular meetings, assemblies, and architectural choices that intertwined autonomy and interdependence: distinct housing units developed around a collective space designed to encourage cooperation and sharing.

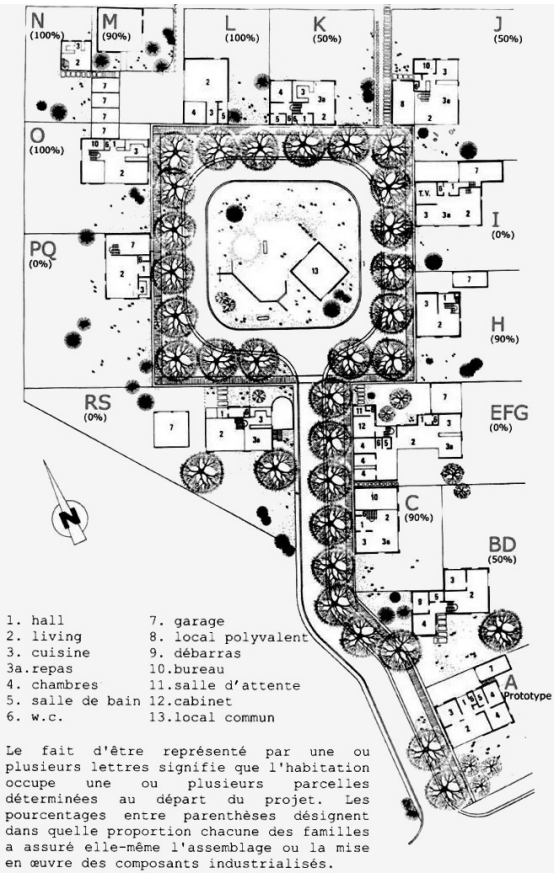


Poster for the Sart San Nicolas project. Drawing by Paul Petit, Marcinelle 1974
© Archive Paul Petit..

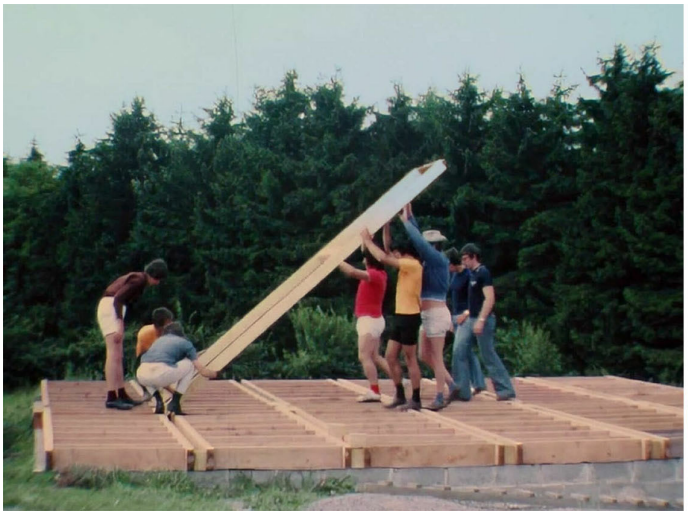
Architecturally, the housing units are organized around a shared central garden, equipped with outdoor play areas and directly overlooked by most of the dwellings' kitchens, so that everyday domestic activities, such as preparing dinner, remained visually and spatially connected to children's collective play, allowing care and supervision to be exercised through proximity rather than separation.

At Sart Saint Nicolas, sharing did not concern only the common spaces (the central square and the collective room around which the residences are organized) but extended to the entire experience of community life. The future residents were not limited to being consulted during the design phase: they negotiated budgets, materials, and housing solutions, participating directly in the assembly of the prefabricated modules. In this collective construction site, hammers and electrical cables, games and snacks intertwined in the same space forming a common good: the construction process itself became a site of social formation, turning shared learning into a concrete form of collective life and co-responsibility. As one resident recalls: "If I had to take one of my children to an extracurricular activity and leave the other two at home, I knew they could stay with a neighbor or play in the courtyard, under the cross-supervision of the neighbors. Raising three children was lighter because the community was around us. I never felt alone, even when my husband was traveling for work." The same woman emphasizes: "The greatest gift we could give our children was to let them grow up in absolute freedom, surrounded by this community of other children."

Thus, in an era marked by the coal crisis and the need to adopt economical construction materials, what was learned on site combined with daily care and mutual supervision: the common spaces, construction sites, squares, and courtyards became concrete devices of collective life, transforming the management of domestic work and care into a shared, political, and liberating project. At Sart Saint Nicolas, residents built their homes and a community together, sharing spaces and accountability.



Plans of the Sart San Nicolas project, Drawing by Paul Petit, Marcinelle, 1974
© Archive Paul Petit.

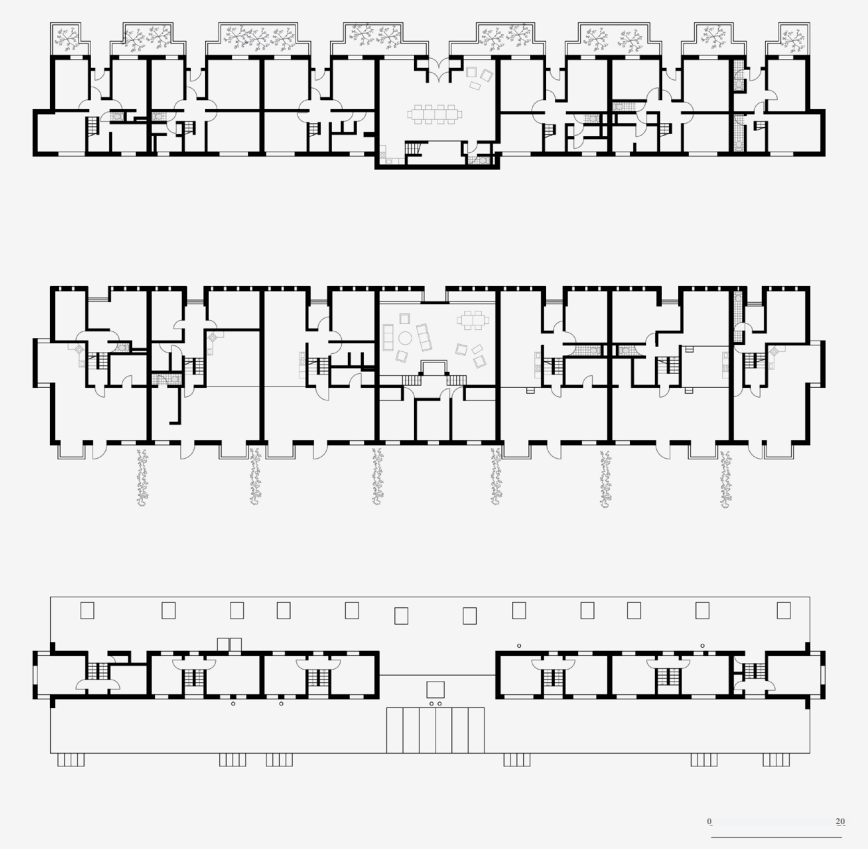


Left: Photo of the building site, Sart San Nicolas project,
Right: Photo of a festive moment during the building site,
Sart San Nicolas project, 1975, Marcinelle
© Inabitants Archive.

LES ARBRELLES: PROXIMITY AND AUTONOMY

The les Arbrelles project, realized in 1984 in Braine-le-Château, inaugurated a period of habitat experiments in which cohabitation was interpreted as a delicate balance between proximity and autonomy. Born from the initiative of a small group eager to live in a rural setting with forms of daily solidarity, the project organizes six dwellings by interposing a collective living-kitchen space in front of a large green area that functions as a catalyst for social interactions. Here, sharing is not totalizing but aimed at fostering a diffuse sense of community through limited but significant services, such as the communal garden and some practical functions associated with it, all managed collectively.

Spatially, this balance is articulated through a clear north-south organization: to the north, a large shared garden, collectively maintained through monthly work sessions followed by communal meals in the common house; to the south, smaller gardens directly facing each dwelling, subtly demarcated by low vegetation rather than fences, allowing residents to circulate freely, knock on a neighbor's door, and modulate everyday interactions without mediation.



Plans of Les Arbrelles project. Original drawing by Thierry Lamy, Braine-le-Château, 1984. Drawing by Charles-Alexis Ruzette, 2026. © Thierry Lamy.

The common space is at the center and constitutes the heart of the project: on the ground floor, a communal kitchen and a meeting place; on the upper floor, a collective lounge and two rooms intended for occasional guests. These latter spaces were not conceived as mere reserves of space, but as active social devices, still functioning today. "A few years ago, we hosted a single mother with her two children while she was going through a divorce," recalls Nathan, a child resident. He was the schoolmate of one of the children involved. A former resident and founder instead recounts

how, in those same spaces, self-organized political meetings were held and how the group provided accommodation to some people seeking asylum in the 1980s. At les Arbrelles, hospitality and civic engagement were not accessory activities, but an integral part of the project: the house truly became a place of extended care and active solidarity, also for people outside the project. Alongside these extraordinary gestures, a form of everyday *bienveillance* also developed: in moments of need, such as for older residents, other neighbors would spontaneously offer to help. Residents shaped both the physical space and a culture of care, solidarity, and hospitality, making everyday life a collective, civic project. "I remember that whenever I needed something, there was always someone ready to lend a hand and carry my shopping bags from the car to the house," says Nelly, a former founder. Here, care took shape in small yet powerful gestures: solidarity inhabited every corner like a hearth that is always alight.

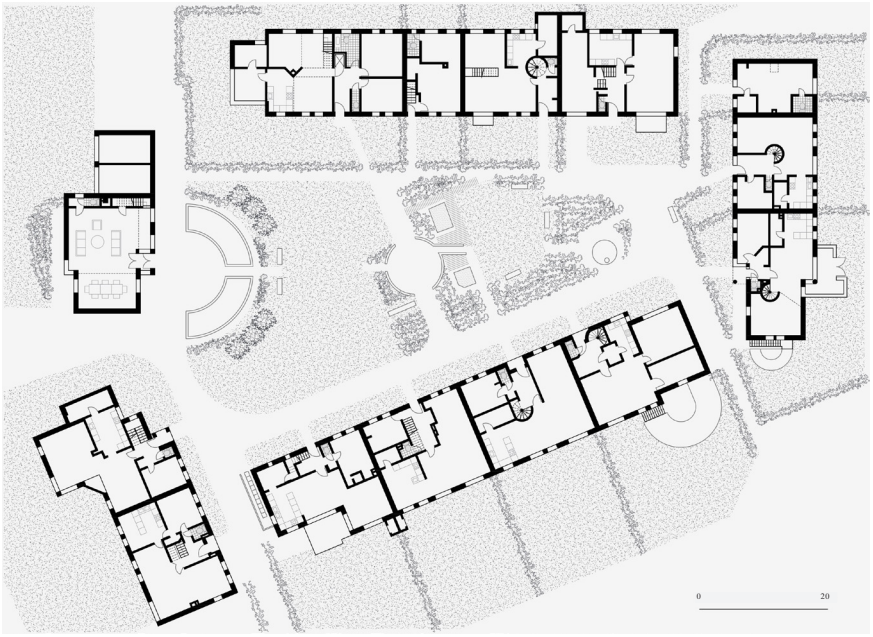
LA PLACETTE: GROWING UP IN CARE

With la Placette (1986), realized two years after les Arbrelles, Lamy continued and refined this research, translating it into a different spatial configuration. In this case, community life takes shape around a central courtyard with collective spaces designed to support conviviality without infringing on the privacy of the thirteen dwellings.

In both projects, the architect did not participate as a future resident, yet did not work in isolation. Instead, the projects emerged through iterative dialogues with the inhabitants, in which the spatial configuration itself became a medium for translating social intentions. Courtyards, thresholds, shared rooms, and private units were carefully calibrated to balance visibility and withdrawal, random encounter and the realm of the individual. The layout of houses around the central courtyard, the orientation of living rooms and the majority of the kitchens toward shared outdoor spaces, and the design of accessible routes for people with disabilities illustrate how architectural form directly mediates social bonds, supporting collective care, informal supervision, and flexible interactions without prescribing specific patterns of use. In this way, architecture operates as a device that conditions, rather than dictates, cohabitation: it allows communal life to emerge gradually, attuned to the rhythms and needs of its inhabitants, while retaining a measured, politically significant structure.

At la Placette, a group of families made up of twenty adults and forty children participates in the project. Four of the thirteen houses arranged around the central courtyard were designed for people with motor or cognitive disabilities. The houses designed for residents with reduced mobility were strategically located along the natural curves of the gently sloping site, allowing direct access by car or wheelchair and ensuring that these dwellings were fully integrated into the community without segregation. Accessibility thus becomes a form of spatial justice and the community a mechanism that recognizes vulnerability as a shared condition.

Unlike at l'Abreuvoir, where communal life is structured through a daily and intense use of shared spaces, at la Placette sharing is sparser but ritualized: once a month all residents gather to carry out the *travaux communs*, the collective works: days dedicated to gardening, maintaining the courtyard, cleaning the collective spaces, and caring for threshold areas. This is not a continuous act of management, but a suspended and intentional time of collective care, in which the community makes itself visible to itself and renews its bonds.



Plans of the la Placette project. Original drawing by Thierry Lamy, Wezembeek-Oppem,1986. Drawing by Charles-Alexis Ruzette, 2026. © Thierry Lamy.

It is within this practical, material, and embodied device that the experience recounted by a former resident, then a child and now in her forties, also takes place: “Rosalie, who was my age, was in a wheelchair, with a complex disability, and could not speak. But during the common tasks, we would take turns feeding her. That’s how we learned… I don’t know, to be sensitive. It was, I believe, my first real education in diversity, in tolerance, in the possibility that very different people could cooperate together.” In the same account, Thierry, who had a mental disability, also emerges as someone who would go from house to house delivering messages, knocking, entering, eating: figures fully embedded in daily life, not users of a service but subjects of relationships. The travaux communs thus become moments of sensitive and affective learning: not just the maintenance of space, but a shared exercise of attention, responsibility, and care. It is there, while pruning a hedge or cleaning a path, that children learn to “take care”; it is there that vulnerability ceases to be an exception and becomes part of the inhabited normality. Another former resident recalls her own birth as a collective event: “It was not just one family that welcomed me, but eleven families. My mother was nursing me on the garden side, and on the other side of the glass, all the neighboring children came to watch.” The numerous neighborhood children were perceived as brothers and sisters, and some families organized car sharing to take them to school together. The family extends, care expands, and childhood forms within a constellation of presences. In this sense, the fact that housing for people with disabilities was planned from the very beginning of the project is not a functional detail, but a societal statement: one grows up within care, one grows up with difference, one grows up in relation. The community does not compensate for vulnerability: it embraces it as an original condition of dwelling. By integrating housing for people with disabilities from the start, the project made inclusion and vulnerability a shared condition, teaching children and adults alike to grow up in relation and community.

EMANCIPATION

Across these examples, we observe how the deliberate organization of space (through shared courtyards, central gardens, common rooms, and flexible domestic units) intertwines with collective practices of care, supervision, and co-responsibility. The architecture, combined with self-organized routines, enables residents to interact, cooperate, and learn from one another, fostering mutual trust and extending social networks beyond individual households. It is precisely this entanglement of form and practice that sets the stage for a broader discussion on emancipation: the ways in which inhabiting, shaping, and sharing domestic space can produce not only communal solidarity but also individual and collective liberation.

Besides the different ways in which these projects addressed the socialization of domestic labor, what is at stake in all these examples of habitat groupé is that they can all be considered spaces of empowerment. Etymologically, the term (from the Latin *ex-mancipium*, "to be freed from ownership")[18] denotes an act of liberation from structures of material and symbolic subordination. In the context of the habitat groupé, it takes on a broader meaning: residents become active agents, capable of redefining their social position not only through work or community engagement but also through the transformation of everyday relationships and domestic spaces. They learn together, build together, and care together; through this reciprocal process, each individual discovers the capacity to shape their own existence and that of others, sharing spaces, skills, and responsibilities. Emancipation here means both creating community and simultaneously liberating oneself as an individual and overcoming isolation, implicit hierarchies, and imposed solitude. In this sense, self-determination encompasses all residents (men, women, children, and even temporary guests) who participate in a collective process of autonomy and mutual responsibility.

Photo of the children's community of the Sart San Nicolas project playing in the central garden in front of the common living room, 1980, Marcinelle

18 *Etymologically derived from the Latin* emancipare *(ex- "out of" +* mancipium, *"ownership" or "possession"), the term originally referred in Roman law to the act of releasing a person from paternal authority or ownership.*
https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/emancipation

As Simone de Beauvoir emphasizes, female emancipation cannot be understood as a mere improvement of individual conditions, but requires a profound transformation of the social structures that have historically produced and reinforced the subordination of women.[19] In this sense, the shared spaces of the habitat groupé function as political microcosms, concrete experiments in structural change, where care, collaboration, and solidarity challenge and reorient patriarchal power relations, opening up new possibilities for freedom, self-determination, and liberation. This transformation is not only theoretical: it clearly emerges in the accounts of the people who inhabited these spaces. As Françoise, a founder and resident of l'Abreuvoir observes, some changes were significant: "The collective management of childcare and meal preparation not only lightened the physical burden but also freed up mental space so that women could pursue goals outside the domestic sphere."

L'Abreuvoir, Sart Saint Nicolas, Les Arbrelles, and La Placette convey, through the voices of residents of different ages and generations, the same grammar of everyday trust, made up of proximity, availability, and mutual care. Spatial configurations and the intensity of collective life change, but the sense of being able to rely on others in times of need remains unchanged. As residents from different backgrounds recount, the "knowing that it is enough to knock on the next door" becomes a silent, non-institutionalized form of security, transforming the neighborhood into a network of concrete support. In this choral repetition, shared living ceases to be an ideology and manifests itself as lived practice, embodied in the ordinary gestures of everyday life. People speak of cooking shifts carried out by all the residents, of children moving from one house to another as if domestic space were already something else, already shared. As Françoise said in 2023, "The children went everywhere, there were no real boundaries for them." "I lived years of extreme freedom, a formidable experience. Our parents trusted us," said Isabelle, daughter of the founders of Abreuvoir, who is no longer a resident. "They knew there were no dangers. I considered 'my' space to extend well beyond the walls of our apartment."

Photo of the children's community of the Abreuvoir project in the shared garden, 1974, Bruxelles
© Archive Françoise Wolff.

19 Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 2015 ed. (London: Random House, 1949).

The testimonies do not speak of emancipation in theoretical terms, but through gestures: the time regained thanks to a dinner (planned through shifts) prepared in rotation; the possibility of working outside the home because another parent, that day, was watching the children or picking them up from school. It was the politicization of the everyday, feminism acting through space and actions. Here, architecture does not merely contain life: it makes it possible, it orients it, it conditions its forms of subjectivity: shared kitchens from which to observe children while they play, flexible spaces in common living areas, shared gardens conceived not for decoration but for encounter.

BURNING FROM MARGIN TO CENTER

Up to this point, habitats groupés appear as a potential laboratory of residents' agency. But, like every social experiment, these spaces also carry tensions, ambivalences, and unresolved hierarchies. If female emancipation constitutes one of the declared political horizons of these experiments, it is precisely on this terrain that their ambivalences emerge most clearly, revealing how the transformation of space does not automatically coincide with the transformation of power relations. Although the Belgian habitats groupés of the 1970s–80s were configured as spaces of liberation for many women, offering concrete alternatives to the solitude and economic dependence of the nuclear family, they were not free of contradictions. In more than one case, collective care work was delegated to external women, often less privileged or with fewer possibilities for self-determination. As bell hooks reminds us, "It is not a matter of moving domestic work from one woman to another, but of deconstructing the structures that make it invisible and oppressive."[20] In this sense, these dynamics risk reproducing, in attenuated form, those same logics of class and racialization that intersectional feminism urges us to dismantle.

The women who lived in those spaces were often educated, bourgeois, and apolitically engaged. Liberation from domesticity was real, but partial, in part because the ones who took care of the children and prepared snacks, after an initial phase of collective enthusiasm that lasted a few years (in the case of l'Abreuvoir), were often other women: younger, less privileged, with less voice. A single mother, in need for a job that would allow her to take care of her child while working at l'Abreuvoir ended up taking on childcare tasks alongside the more privileged women who lived there. These were *filles* or *garçons au pair* hired and paid by individual families (in the case of La Placette). As bell hooks already pointed out, with her sharp lucidity: What is emancipation, if the conquest of one's own freedom passes through the subjugation of another? "Domestic work does not disappear: it moves," she wrote.[21] From the mistress to the caregiver, from the sister to the domestic worker. From center to margin, precisely.

In this sense, the Belgian habitats groupés, like many bourgeois utopias, offered a new space for everyday life, but often ignored the fact that everyday life (the most exhausting part of it), can be decentered, offloaded, outsourced, in its infinite, Sisyphean repetitiveness.[22] And so the question returns to burn like Hestia's fire: Who keeps it alive, if everyone is free to leave? What re-emerges, then, is the silent yet central figure of the personified fire, an immobile presence that embodies the very endurance of shared space. Hestia does not move but remains rooted in her place, offering warmth, light, and continuity. In myth, the hearth is a symbol of cohesion and protection, a place of shared energy. Yet, if we look closely, this sacred fire has a double nature: on the one hand, it is refuge and space

20 bell hooks, *Feminist theory : from margin to center* (Boston (Ma.): South end press, 1984).
21 Ibid.
22 De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

of sharing; on the other, it is also a boundary line that defines who is allowed to care and who is relegated to the margins. The guardianship of the hearth thus becomes invisible labor, often unrecognized and unpaid, a role that carries power but also isolation and fatigue. In this sense, the dynamics illustrated represent a complex political microcosm: a laboratory of self-determination that attempts to rewrite the rules of domestic and social space but that at the same time reproduces, or at least does not fully dismantle, hierarchies and structural inequalities. The challenge, then, is twofold: to rethink care as a collective and shared practice, capable of liberating rather than oppressing; but also to transform the social relations that make it possible, because true emancipation is never only individual or local, but always intertwined with social justice and the struggle against every form of exploitation.

THE FUSE OF THE EVERYDAY REVOLUTION

Hestia (Ἑστία, Hestíā) in Greek mythology embodied the goddess of the hearth, or more precisely the fire that burned upon a circular hearth.[23] Together with her Roman counterpart Vesta, she is often depicted with her head veiled and was rarely represented in human form, as her presence manifested itself through the living flame placed at the center of houses, temples, and cities, guardian of communal life.[24] Within this framework, Hestia's "private" is neither withdrawal nor passivity: it is an act of conscious presence, a process that enables the construction of deep spiritual bonds with the community. Domestic care, when lived through this archetype, is no longer an invisible burden but a sacred activity, bearer of inner harmony and social cohesion. When this centrality is emptied of its sacred and political dimension, the hearth ceases to be a center and becomes a boundary: the house closes in, care is privatized, and the female body is confined. It is against this long drift that, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, feminist thought would begin to interrogate domestic space as a field of struggle.

The archetype of Hestia, whose circular fire embodies a silent, rooted force, symbolizes the capacity to remain present and attentive at the center of domestic and communal life. In this perspective, emancipation requires both recognition of one's agency and the transformation of social structures that confine care and domestic labor to invisibility and unchosen obligations. The hearth is no longer a biological destiny, but a space for negotiation; it is therefore a matter of transforming it, of resemantizing it as a common, fluid, and polyphonic space, where Hestia's fire does not burn in solitude but illuminates the bonds that resist neoliberal atomization. In the Belgian habitats groupés, this fire circulates through shared kitchens, living areas, and gardens, becoming a force that resists the privatization of domestic labor and enables both communal solidarity and individual liberation.

23 Esiodo, *Teogonia*, trans. Graziano Arrighetti, 2023 ed., ed. Einaudi (ET Classici, 700 a.C).

24 Ovid, Fasti, VI, 256–268; 283–298: *"It is said that Rome had already celebrated forty Parilia when the goddess who watches over the fire was welcomed into her temple, the work of the gentle king (Numa); (…) Vesta is like the earth: beneath both there is perpetual fire; for earth and fire symbolize the home itself. (…) Why wonder if a virgin delights in virgin priestesses and admits to her rites only chaste hands? And by Vesta understand nothing other than the living flame: you see that no body is ever born from flame. Thus she is rightly a virgin, since she neither gives nor receives seed, and she delights in followers of unbroken purity. Foolish I was long to think that there were images of Vesta, for I have learned that beneath the dome's vault there is none. In that temple there hides the inextinguishable fire: neither Vesta nor the fire can have any effigy."*; Giuliana Borghesani, *Hestia-Vesta*, Storia delle religioni, (Dielle Editore, 2019).

One of the rare icons of Hestia: Detail of a fresco of Hestia,
Lararium Painting, Pompei, first century BC.

The experiences of the habitats groupés, though partial and sometimes contradictory, demonstrate that it is possible to rewrite the everyday as a field of struggle and radical imagination. The hearth, far from being extinguished, can still burn as a spark, representing a mode of existence in which domesticity is not servitude, but a space of awareness: in this light, the Belgian habitats groupés of the 1970s and 1980s can be read as attempts to reactivate the collective fire, relieving care from its privatized isolation. Perhaps precisely because Hestia had no face or body, her flame could belong to everyone and no one: genderless, without domination. Her presence at the center of common space suggests the possibility of a collective subjectivity, in which care is not an assigned task but a practice that is redistributed, multiplied, and politicized. To think that Hestia has no face or body is already a political act: she is not mother, she is not wife, she is not commodity. She is collective function, shared fire, a force that resists the individualization of care work. If she has no gender, then she can belong to everyone: in every deconstructed hearth, in every self-managed shift, Hestia returns not as an icon of domesticity, but as the fuse of the everyday revolution. Her flame burns in the gestures that reject domesticity as destiny. It is anonymity that burns the roles. It is care rising up against possession: it is the fire that remains when roles dissolve. In the Belgian habitats groupés of the 1970s and 1980s, Hestia did not stay at the center of the house: there, Hestia left the hearth and set the house on fire.

AUTHOR

Marta Malinverni is an architect and PhD candidate at the Faculty of Architecture, UCLouvain in Brussels. Her research examines the relationship between cohousing and the spatial organisation of domestic life from a feminist perspective. She teaches Architectural Design and is a member of the *Uses&Spaces* research group. Alongside her academic work, she is actively engaged in advocacy initiatives that promote the visibility of women in architecture.

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